What They Think, Feel and Say

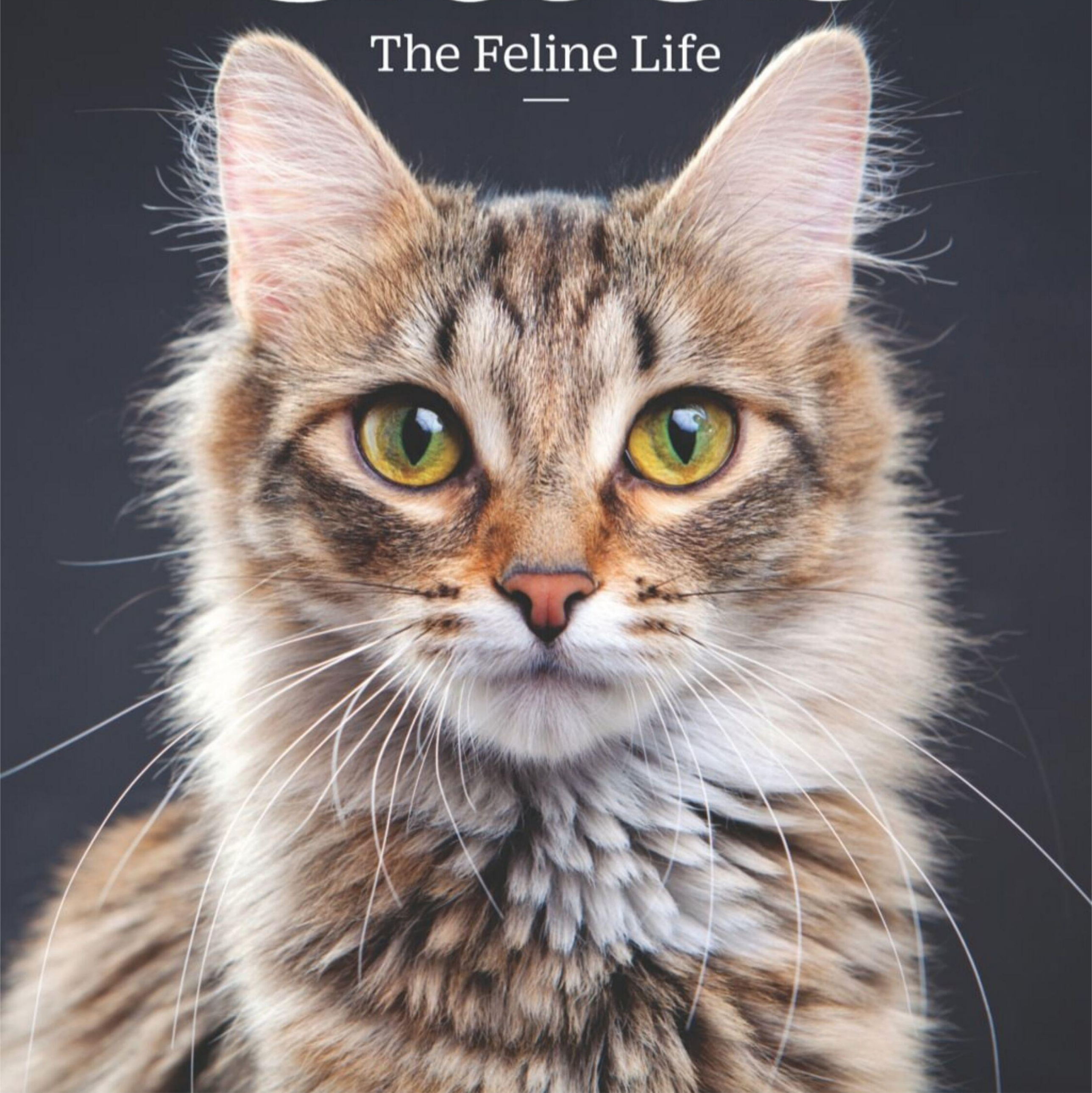
TIME

SPECIAL EDITION

The Power of Cat People

Cats

The Feline Life



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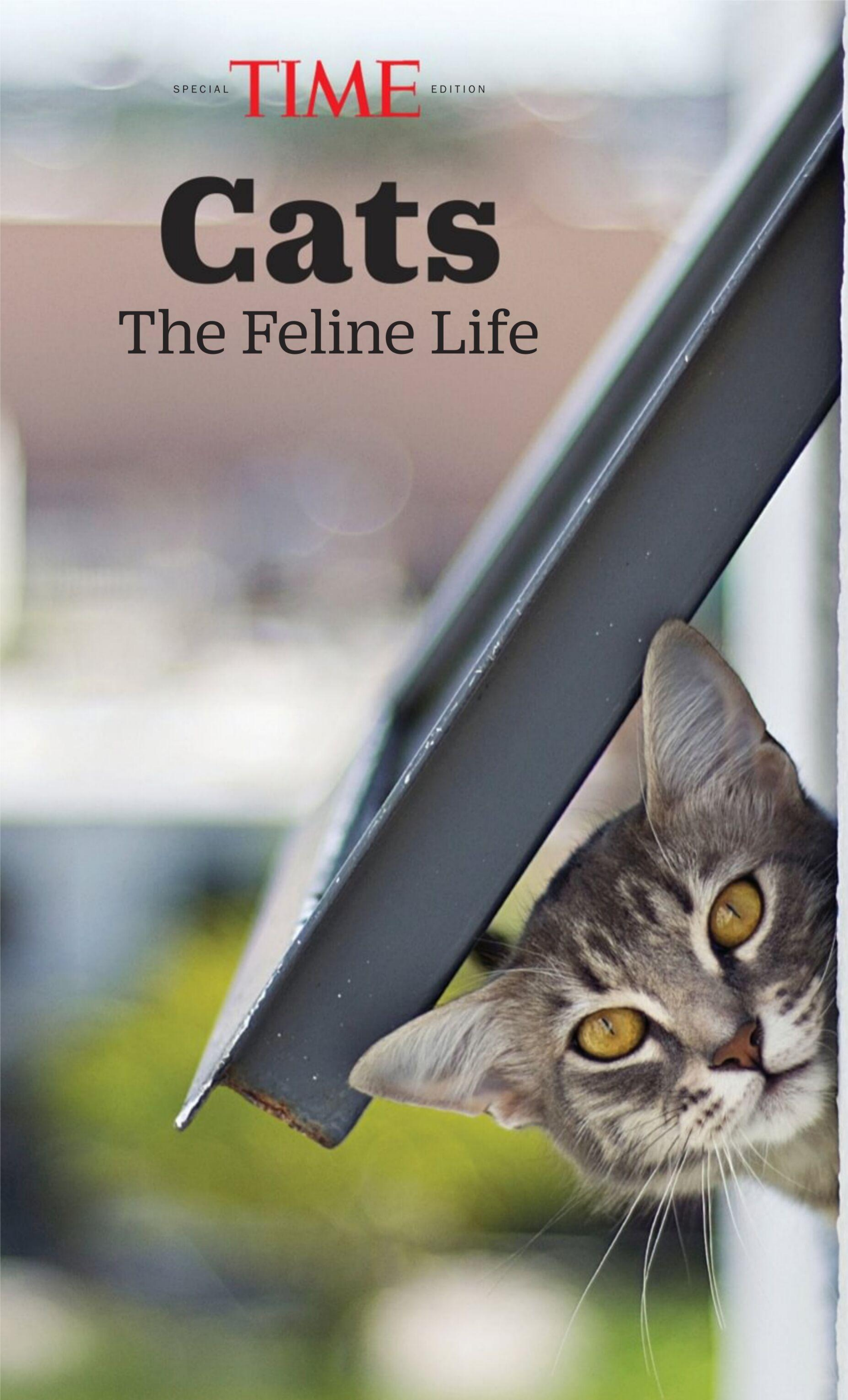

WITH THE RISE OF REMOTE WORK IN RECENT YEARS, CATS HAVE BECOME OFFICE MATES AND OCCASIONAL ZOOM-BOMBERS.

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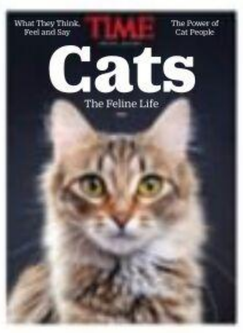
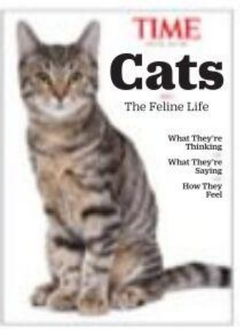




There are two covers of this *Time* special edition.

We're Crazy About Cats

They can be wild and mysterious and aloof, but here's the main thing to know about our feline friends: More than 46 million Americans have fallen in love with them.

J.D. REED

MOHAMMAD CUT THE SLEEVE FROM his robe rather than disturb his friend, asleep on the Prophet's gown. Samuel Johnson pampered his spoiled companion Hodge daily with meals of fresh oysters. Victor Hugo cherished Gavroche. Cardinal Richelieu left a generous legacy for the 14 he owned. Napoleon is said to have broken into a cold sweat at the sight of one. In his childhood, Smerdyakov, in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, was fond of hanging them. Thomas Hardy and Thomas Gray wrote poems to them; Hemingway shared dinner with his. Physician and scholar Albert Schweitzer favored two ways to take refuge from human misery: playing the organ and delighting in the play of his cats.

From deification to demonization and every stage in between, attitudes toward cats have been confused, variable, peculiar, consuming, jittery, and, ultimately, baffling. Those sinuous forms represented in Egyptian art, valued as rodent chasers by farmers, or draped luxuriously over an apartment radiator have elicited the best and worst from mankind in the 5,000 years since their domestication. The dog may be man's best friend, but the cat is his most perplexing one, if, indeed, he is one at all.

A prodigious number of Americans are smitten with cats, with 46.5 million households owning cats in the United States in 2023. Others continue to badmouth felines. Are cats stouthearted companions or unresponsive curmudgeons? Or are they, as cartoonist Bernard Kliban suggested in his bestselling album *Cat*, merely whimsical meatloaves?

Cats, love 'em or hate 'em, are a hot number. Plain or fancy, pampered or ignored, barn mousers or apartment pets, they have captured the American imagination.

Weighing in at an average of 10 pounds, the cat has a uniquely flexible backbone. When dropped from a height of less than one foot in an upside-down position, it will land on its paws in an incredible 1.8 seconds. Its whiskers transmit complex information about its

prey and surroundings to nerve bundles beneath the skin. According to one parapsychologist, the cat may even harbor a trace of ESP. A feline named Pooh, for example, who wandered off before his owners moved some 200 miles from Newnan, Georgia, to a small town near Spartanburg, South Carolina, turned up at the family's new back door a year later.

The cat's sensitive ears are precisely tuned to discern the scrabble of paws beneath the ground. They even have their own self-cleaning service: Cat saliva provides antibacterial protection. Asleep, a cat may resemble a throw pillow or a Kliban-style meatloaf, but awake and hungry, the average feline, one of the most highly evolved predators in the natural world, is capable of dispatching a dozen mice at a brief sitting. Alarmingly, they tend to dawdle before administering the coup de grâce. Behavioralists believe this happens because cats are programmed by a primitive, vestigial stalking mechanism. Cats toy with their prey because they may be teaching kittens to hunt or may be exhibiting their prowess; instinctively cats do not always relate killing with the need to eat. When they finally do away with a mouse, it is with Darwinian perfection. The cat's teeth are so arranged as to sever a rodent's spine with surgical precision.

DID PEOPLE DOMESTICATE THE CAT, OR DID THE CAT DECIDE TO SHARE LIFE WITH US? IT IS AN UNANSWERED DILEMMA.

It is an almost unbudgeable popular belief—and a false one—that cats and dogs have an instinctive rivalry. Animal owners, however, are often more partisan than their pets. "I'm not a cat person; I'm a dog person" is a frequently expressed predilection. The cat is sly and fickle, say canine lovers. It is cruel, indifferent, and, well, catty. Such deprecations may mask a deeper dislike.

Investigators have never reached a consensus on ailurophobia, an extreme fear of cats. Some postulate a traumatic childhood experience with felines, while others blame the cat's galvanizing stare, or disdain for affection, or even its slippery, furred coat and unfriendly, arching backbone. Traditional superstitions still exist: Cats suck the breath from sleeping infants, sour fresh milk, forecast the phases of the moon, and serve Satan. A black cat is bad luck. According to old belief, a cat, through necromancy or something even more unfathomable, has been given nine lives. Such Draculatic positions, however, are rare. Cats themselves often seem instinctively to regard fear or hatred in people as a signal to antagonize visitors. Many owners report that their pets will purposely force their unwanted attentions on squeamish guests.

Cat haters delight in announcing that a Siamese will not faithfully drool in your lap for a kind word like a Labrador retriever. Even the most fervid owners of felines can be surprised—almost to cardiac arrest—by their pets' peculiarities. Your cat lurks in the dark attic just when you thought you were alone. As a form of endearment, he may jump on your shoulder from the top of the refrigerator. He may refuse all food until you cook the same kind of bacon-and-cheese sandwich he enjoyed a week ago. He will, in the meantime, deposit a variety of dead and near-dead things at the back door and stalk away for a nap. He may shred the antique silk draperies or decide that the shower stall is a Bauhaus litter pan. Whether the cat is friend or foe, many would agree with the prominent 18th-century naturalist Count de Buffon. The cat, he wrote, "appears to have feelings only for himself, loves only conditionally, and only enters into relations [with people] in order to abuse them."

Votaries of the cat take a different view. From Cleopatra to Colette, they have praised *Felis domestica* in stories, songs, and poems for grace, independence, intelligence, perseverance, and fastidious ways. Unlike the dog or man, cats do not form soviets or pyramid clubs to achieve dubious pack goals. While they may pick a top cat, felines do not seem to require rigid hierarchies when a number of them live together. If human, cats might play solitaire, but they would never sit around with the gang and a few six-packs watching *Monday Night Football*. Their aloof singularity lies at the heart of human fascination with the animal. The cat's wild ways endure and charm. In Japan the cat is called "the tiger that eats from the hand."

Many people believe that cats are so biologically programmed for survival in the wilderness that they cannot be trained. While unaltered cats are almost impossible to work with, say the experts, food and affection—heavy on the food, please—will help teach most house cats to forgo clawing the couch

Dogs and cats do not have an instinctive rivalry. Their owners are another story.

and spraying. With the patience usually given only to holy men—plus more food—felines can also be tutored in the arts of sitting on command, lying down, and rolling over. Some proud owners have even instructed their cats to eat daintily with their paws directly from the food can.

Did people domesticate the cat, or did the cat decide to share life with us? It is, it must be admitted, an unanswered dilemma. Ours is not the first age to wrestle with that issue. Some Egyptians, for instance, reluctant to regard their cats as mundane animals, buried them with great ceremony. In 1888, a bumbling farmer dug up an ancient Egyptian cat necropolis at Beni Hasan. The cemetery contained thousands of mummified cats that had been interred, some with embalmed mice for afterworld meals. Enterprising workers unwrapped the cats and sent a consignment of 19 tons of bones to England for conversion into fertilizer.

By the 10th century, cats were established as mousers. The Welsh defined the legal worth of cats: A seasoned mouser, astonishingly enough, brought four pennies, about the worth of a lamb. By the 17th century, however, the devil, unwelcome and omnipresent, had been doing his worst through the feline. In 1699, for instance, at the Swedish town of Mora, 300 children were accused of employing demon cats to steal butter, cheese, and bacon. Fifteen of the children were killed, and every Sunday for a year, 36 were whipped before the church doors. By the mid-18th century, the cat was back in favor. Frederick the Great thought so highly of cats he made them official guards of his army's stores and ordered conquered towns to furnish supplies of

cats. The Industrial Revolution greatly expanded the middle class and accelerated the reentry of felines into social acceptance by employing them in rodent-infested cities and celebrating them in prose and popular song.

Nowadays Americans lavish little art but elaborate care on their cats. It may have been a technological breakthrough that made cat tending less onerous and fueled all this attention. Explains one close observer of the animal universe, Boston veterinarian Jean Holzworth: "When you talk about convenience, the advent of cat litter is comparable to the invention of the electric light bulb."

Some experts find in this obsession with felines a shift in the American psyche. Robert Perper, a New York veterinarian, says that he has noticed a great increase in male ownership of cats among his patients: "There's a lot of macho in dog persons. Dogs are bigger; they're a display. People like to give them hearty slaps and decorate them with collars. . . . [But now] the stigma [of male cat ownership] is gone. They've learned a man can own a cat and still be a man." Peter Borchelt, a behavioralist at Manhattan's Animal Medical Center, wryly points out that you can own a cat and even be an American. While the dog may be the unofficial national pet, he says, "Americans are known for their laissez-faire attitude. These characteristics define the cat." Chicago pet shop owner Donna Dunlop adds: "It's not just children and the elderly who have cats; it's young professionals in their 30s who are getting them." The inconvenience of owning a dog in a city, where apartment sizes have shrunk and pooper-scooper laws make the litter pan look like a less burdensome alternative, may also explain the upsurge in catomania. Says New York's ASPCA executive director John Kullberg about the guard dog–cat controversy, "If you buy a cat, you can always get an extra lock for the door."

Perhaps, too, the cat, regal and precise, aloof and alone, reflects the preferred—or enforced—situation of the 27 percent of American households where single adults dwell. "Cats are a perfect way out of urban alienation," says Dunlop. And behind bars, the cat softens hard-time sentences. Some prisoners at the Lorton Reformatory in Virginia keep up to five cats at once. Says Charles E. ("Itchy") Richardson, 30, who is serving 10 to 40 years for burglary: "Cats teach you what some dudes down here can't understand. They give you love. They don't talk back, and they don't steal from you."

The cat's very singularity is the most important bond between man and animal. The wildness of the cat, its instinctual businesslike yet skewed version of reality, is more than enchanting. Behavioral research now postulates that while humans may ascribe to the cat a number of sophisticated genetic motives, the cat is fascinated with man because he appeals to the cat's suppressed childishness. Kittens raised by humans associate man with suckling, warmth, mother's milk, and childhood learning play. While the adult feline is obsessed with

Over time, an increasing number of men have joined the ranks of cat people.

reproduction, territorial battles, and mousing, we remain large toys and surrogate mothers who possess such miracles as wall can openers, crinkly cellophane, and electric blankets. Nor do cats, like Kliban's cartoon meatloaves, respond with interest to human grown-up preoccupations. They pay no mind to politics or opinion polls. They remain unimpressed by Kiwanis, cocaine, and PBS. Felines yawn equally at the reputations of Beyoncé and Vladimir Putin. Cats operate in an exclusive and maddening parabola of reality that can frustrate our lives or demand our attention and tune our sensibilities to more graceful things. While people argue about their courage, usefulness, and affection, the cat has its own game to play. Can they entice people to open their homes, refrigerators, and hearts? The cat seems to be winning the contest. At halftime, the scorecard reads: People 1, Meatloaves 2. □

Reported by Maureen Dowd/Washington and Georgia Harbison/New York, with other bureaus. Adapted from a story that ran in TIME on December 7, 1981.

THE FELINE LIFE

Cats can enchant people within seconds, and then mystify them for the rest of their lives.

Living Well, and Flaunting It

The strongest emotion I feel toward my pet is not love. No, it's jealousy.

BY DAN BOVA

MOST PEOPLE LOVE CATS. ME? I envy them.

Sure, they're sweet and snuggly, cute and cuddly. But don't be fooled—cats are total badasses. While they are technically domesticated animals, they're not *that* domesticated. If the grid goes down and society collapses, we humans and our obedient tail-wagging poodle-oodle-doodles won't last a month. But cats? They'll be running this joint, fat and happy.

I envy how cats take charge in any given situation. To paraphrase Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols, cats know what they want and they know how to get it. For example, many years ago, just after college graduation, a bunch of my buddies moved into an apartment in some dark, disgusting corner of New York City. It was the kind of place that only a bunch of dumb 21-year-old dudes would consider habitable. To bring some sunshine to the place, my friend Nick picked up a kitten from a nearby shelter. He was so proud of himself for rescuing this poor little guy from a life of want and misery. "Welcome to your new home!" he said as he set the kitty down on the living room couch. This cat took one look around at its new digs and declared, "No thanks." It immediately darted off the couch and zipped through a hole in the baseboards. (To reiterate, this was not a very nice place.) Nick and my buddies could hear the cat meowing inside the wall for days and tried to lure it out with kibble, water, cans of tuna, wiggly toys—anything. "Nope," the cat meowed back.

Later that week, Nick's mom came to visit his apartment. Just as he was beginning to explain the whole "there's a cat stuck in the wall situation," the kitty burst out through the hole and jumped straight into his mom's arms. This cat wasn't trapped in the wall; it was waiting for a better option. And when that option came, it pounced. Literally. This cat booked itself a one-way ticket to the forever home it wanted with Mom, whether she liked it or not.

They're more than just cute: A study found that living with cats reduces the risk of fatal heart attacks by 30 percent.

When it comes to food, you'll never find a bigger hustler than a cat. Yes, they'll happily lap up whatever we lovingly put in their bowls, but they're more than capable of taking care of their own needs. Before we were married, my wife, Lisa, shared her apartment with a Maine Coon named Pablo. And Pablo had a knack for securing his own midnight snacks—specifically, the mice that tried to sneak into her tiny kitchen after hours. Many daring mice did not live to tell the tale. Lisa learned of Pablo's nighttime noshing when early one morning, in the middle of a dream in which someone was tickling her nose with a feather duster, she woke up to find Pablo standing over her wiggling a dead mouse in her face. He wanted to share! Self-reliant and generous—how adorable is that? (If you asked my wife that question while she had a rodent shoved up her nose, she'd answer, "Not very adorable at all.")

I envy the fact that cats effortlessly make the lives of those around them better. A 10-year study of more than 4,000 Americans by researchers at the University of Minnesota's Stroke Institute found that people who have cats have a 30 percent lower risk of dying from a heart attack than people who don't. Now, I wouldn't go replacing your statins with tabbies, but that's a pretty amazing statistic. Purring heart pills! As my beleaguered parents, who had to deal with a teenage version of me, can attest, we humans tend to induce more heart attacks than we prevent.

I have to say that you cannot put a price tag on cats' ability and desire to keep themselves clean. I'm the father of two boys, and from the diaper days to the "What died in your gym bag?" teenage

years, human children require a lot of, let's say, "encouragement" to bathe on a regular basis. Cats are more of a set-it-and-forget-it model. They're a self-cleaning stove that doesn't fill your house with toxic smoke when you turn it on every five years. And damn if all that hard work doesn't pay off for cats. There's no way I'll look that good in 15 years no matter how much I sit around licking myself.

Sure, cats have stresses in their lives—maybe they cohabitate with an over-friendly mutt, maybe they're haunted by that red laser dot that suddenly appears on the floor that they can never catch—but whatever problems they're facing, they are able to sleep. A lot. It's hard not to envy a creature whose life's problems seem to be solved by simply stretching out in a nice warm beam of sunlight. I've tried it and, unfortunately for us non-cats, the car payment is still due when you wake up from your nap. Also, hardwood floors aren't nearly as comfy as kitties make them look.

And they can deal quite easily with spending a lot of time alone. Left on their own for the weekend with bowls of food and water and fresh litter, cats are happy as a clam. When is the last time you were left alone with your thoughts for an extended period of time and came out purring? There's a reason podcasts are so popular: We'd rather fill our brains with anything other than our own terrifying thoughts. I'd kill for a kitty's sense of inner peace. (And I promise I wouldn't wiggle it in anyone's face while they were sleeping.)

Envying cats might seem a bit kooky to some, but it has a royal precedent. Archaeologists discovered many ancient Egyptian tombs containing mummified cats that were eternally snoozing next to their mummified royal mommies and daddies. Sweet, I guess? But the ancients didn't do this just for companionship. The idea was that the deceased human would be able to inhabit the body of the cat in the afterlife. So basically King Tut wanted to exchange his gold-plated life ruling over a vast empire for one where he'd be chasing around rodents and napping all day.

Yeah, I'd make that trade too. ◻

What Goes On in Their Minds?

Scientists have taken up the task of trying to figure out what our furry and mysterious friends are really all about.

They’re not all that tame

If your cat seems to have a wild side, there’s a reason: A study on house cats found that our feline companions are only semi-domesticated.

People began domesticating cats around 9,000 years ago, but DNA researchers from Washington University in St. Louis found in 2014 that house cats still have many of the same traits as their wild cousins. The fact that cats have retained the ability to hunt and survive effortlessly in the wild underscores how little impact we humans have had on them.

Wes Warren, an associate professor of genomics at the university, told the *Los Angeles Times*, “We believe we have created the first preliminary evidence that depicts domestic cats as not that far removed from wildcat populations.”

That’s not to say humans haven’t had *any* influence on cats. We originally took them into our homes to hunt rodents and rewarded that behavior with food. According to researchers, this led to eventual changes in a group of stem cells that resulted in more docile (but not fully domesticated) felines and produced colors and fur patterns that humans liked.

Researchers wrote, “Our results suggest that selection for docility, as a result of becoming accustomed to humans for food rewards, was most likely the major force that altered the first domesticated cat genomes.”

—Helen Regan

They think you are a giant cat

If you own a cat, you probably identify yourself as something like a parent, albeit a human version, who feeds him, entertains him, and licks his fur to keep it clean (well, maybe not that last one). Unfortunately, your cat sees the relationship between owner and pet much differently, according to the book *Cat Sense* by English biologist Dr. John Bradshaw. It actually thinks that you are a "larger, nonhostile" cat.

Bradshaw, who has been studying the behavior of domesticated animals for decades, revealed some fascinating explanations for why cats act the way they do around humans. For one, since cats have never been bred for a specific function other than looking nice, they're ultimately less domesticated than the dog breeds humans have designed for chasing down game and helping around the house. Given that 85 percent of cats breed with feral tomcats, according to the book, the species has also stayed relatively wild. The animals' interactions with their owners are driven less by learned behavior than by pure instinct.

When a cat kneads your body or the surface of a bed, it's a behavior that's meant for his mother's belly, a message to keep milk flowing. Rubbing up against a human leg or hand is a way of treating you as another cat, "the clearest way cats show their affection for us," Bradshaw explained. Leaving dead rats around the house isn't a way of "feeding" their owners; rather, the cats want a safe place to eat their kill. When they actually take a bite of the victim, they realize their normal human-delivered cat food tastes way better. And if you've ever seen a rat in any major city, this should be no great surprise.

So next time you call your cat your "baby" or chide it for being annoying, just remember: It thinks of you as a fairly pleasant roommate who just happens to be freakishly large for reasons it can't comprehend. —*Kyle Chayka*

They can be protective, at least some of the time

A TikTok challenge in which cats were given eggs to protect showed that the animals can be gentle protectors when they have the opportunity. The fun appears to have been started by TikTok user @annao, who shared one of the earliest iterations of the trend. In that video, the user's voice intoned that, "Apparently, if you give a cat an egg, they protect it because it's fragile." Those words became the soundtrack to hundreds of other cat-meet-egg videos.

While cats are not particularly known for their kindness, after being given an egg, many of the cats in the videos seemed to take their newfound responsibilities seriously. They cuddled up on the egg like a hen or wrapped their paws around it in a gentle caress. One cat took his new job so seriously that when his owner came to retrieve the egg, the cat wouldn't let it go, biting the very hand that feeds him to keep the egg safe.

Naturally there were some cats who did not want the responsibility of keeping watch over an egg. Some simply ignored the egg's existence (something that might be familiar to owners). Some cats thought the egg was a new toy. Another cat seemingly had no interest in managing the logistics of keeping something breakable in one piece and decided to skip to the inevitable end. With a swift paw, the cat sent the egg flying to the ground, where it shattered, just like Humpty Dumpty being pushed off his wall. As the cat's owner wrote in the post, "I expected nothing less." *—Melissa Locker*

They don't seem to miss you when you're gone

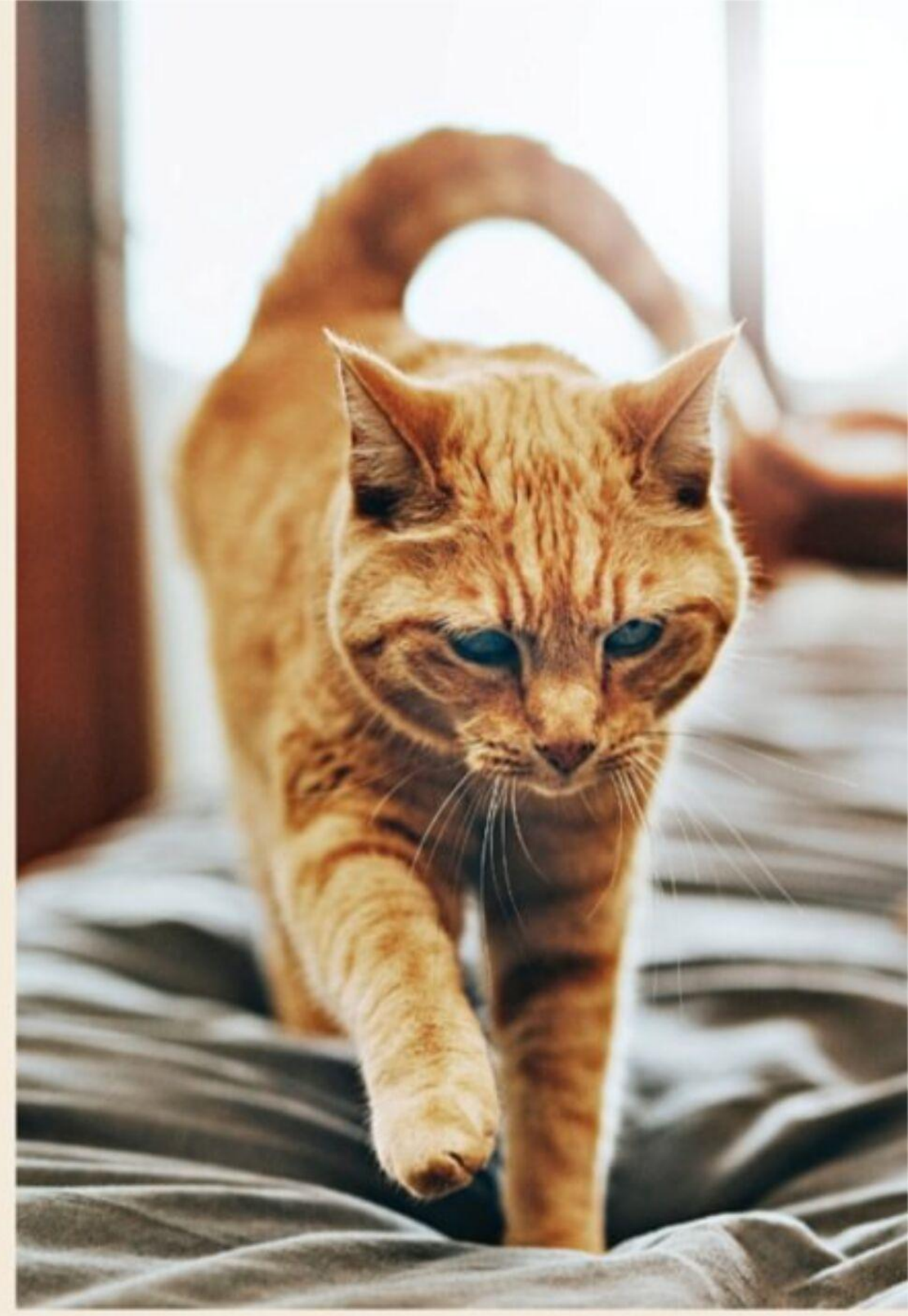
Your cat doesn't really need you. According to a study published in the journal *PLOS One* in 2015, cats show little to no separation anxiety when they're away from their owners, and if/when they stick around their humans, it's because they really want to.

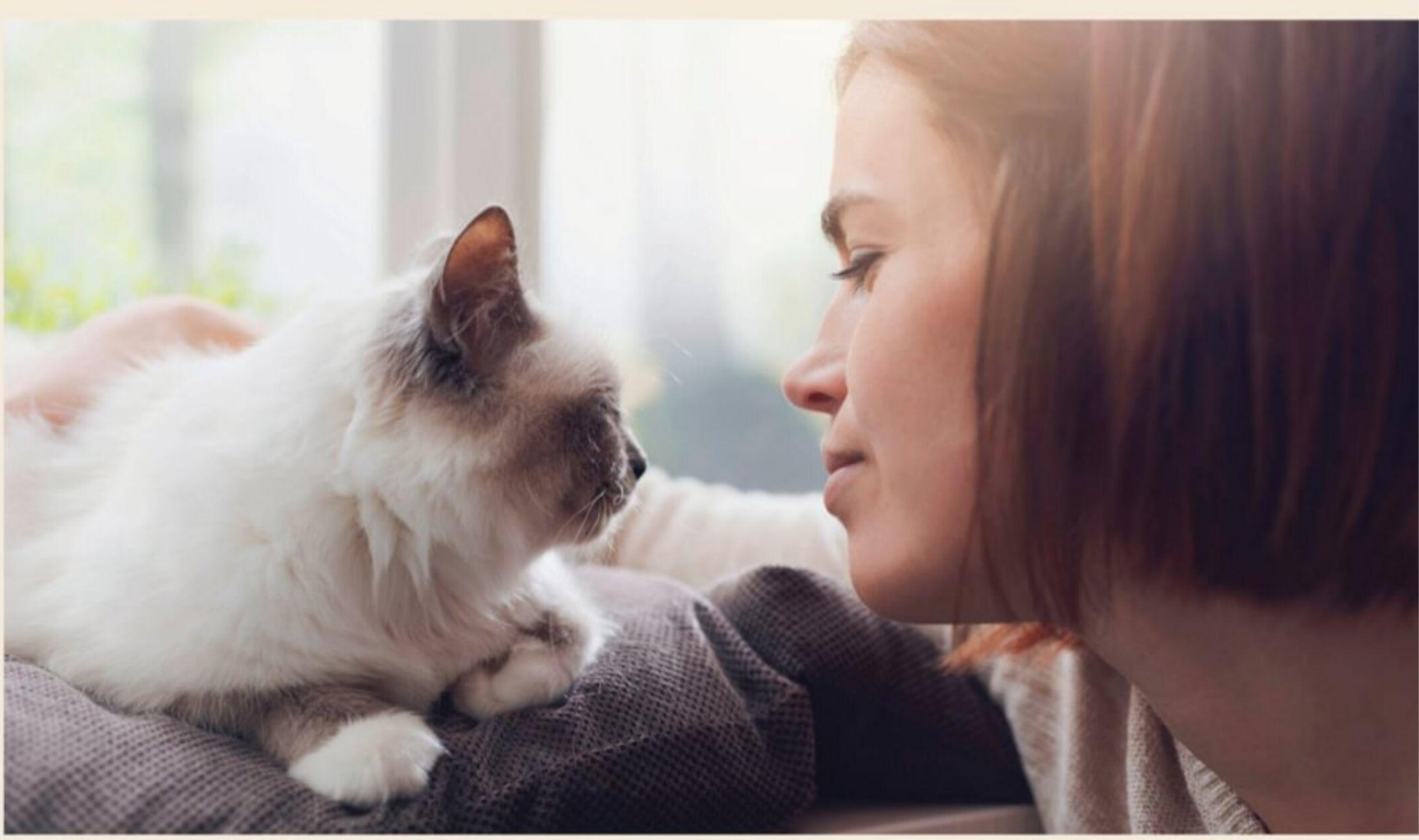
Researchers studied the behavior of 20 cats after they were placed in an unfamiliar location with their owners or with strangers. The results suggest that our feline friends show little to no signs of distress when left alone in unfamiliar environments.

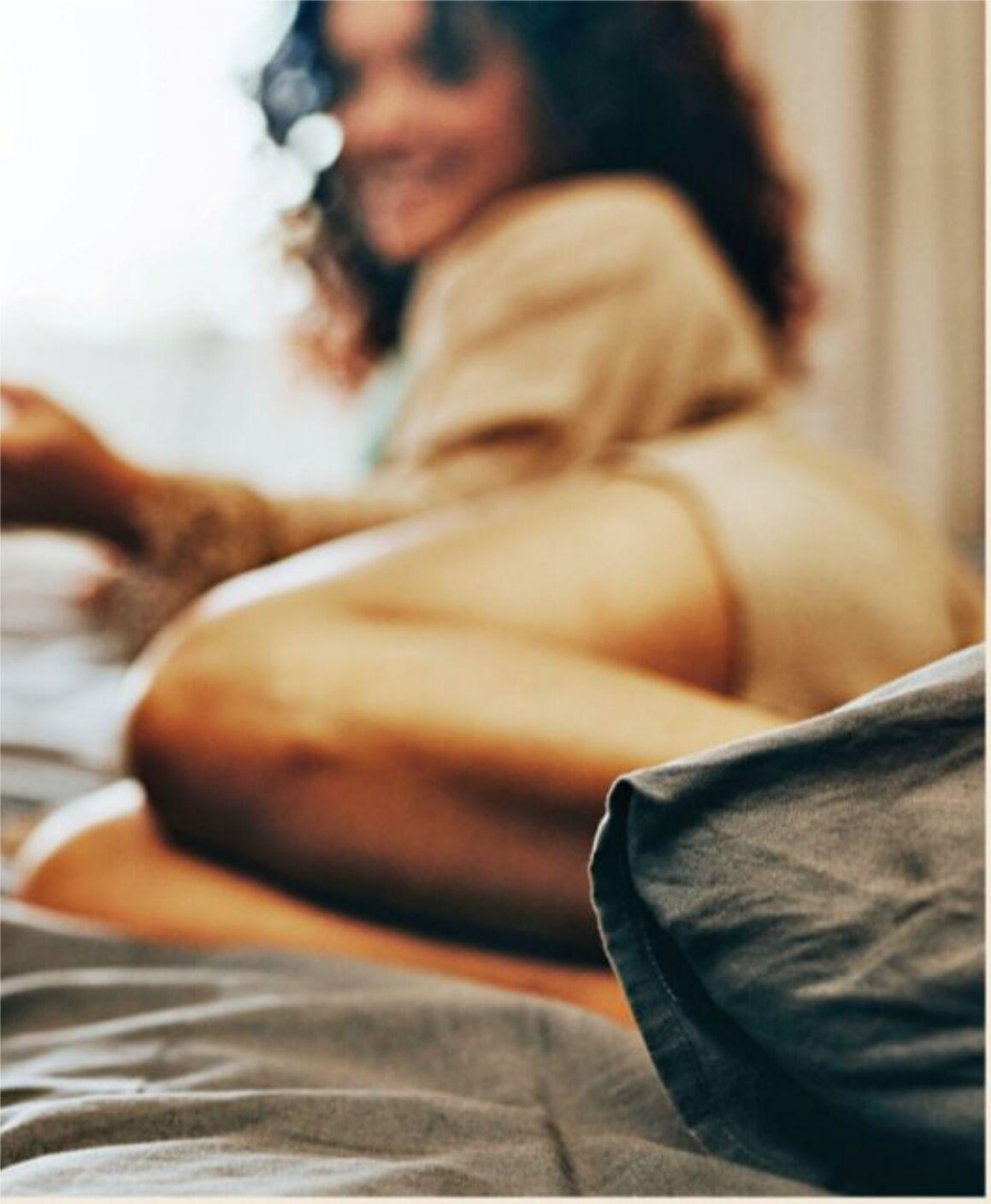
"Although our cats were more vocal when the owner rather than the stranger left them with the other individual, we didn't see any additional evidence to suggest that the bond between a cat and its owner is one of secure attachment," researcher Daniel Mills, professor of Veterinary Behavioural Medicine at the University of Lincoln's School of Life Sciences, told the *Telegraph*.

Animal experts, however, say that this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Cats don't need humans to feel safe, and if they're unhappy, they have no qualms about walking out and not looking back. Therefore, when they feel comfortable enough to stay, it shows that they really mean it.

The study is small and highly interpretative. And cats display distress and emotion in a variety of different ways. So perhaps when it comes to your cat, maybe they need you but just don't know how to show it. —*Maya Rhodan*







They like people more than food

Cats may have a reputation of being standoffish creatures who show their owners affection merely to fill their tummies.

However, a study carried out by scientists from Oregon State University has determined that felines actually prefer human social interaction to food, making them no less loving than their canine counterparts.

For the study, which was published in the journal *Behavioural Processes* in 2017, scientists examined what happened when domestic pets and shelter cats were given a choice of stimuli. The creatures were offered a choice between food, toys, scent, and social interaction with humans.

Although there was clear individual variability in cat preference, social interaction with humans was the preferred activity for the majority of both pet and shelter cats, followed by food.

"Increasingly, cat cognition research is providing evidence of their complex socio-cognitive and problem-solving abilities," the study read. "Nonetheless, it is still common belief that cats are not especially sociable or trainable." So if your cat is being mysterious, perhaps the big secret is how much he likes you. *—Kate Samuelson*

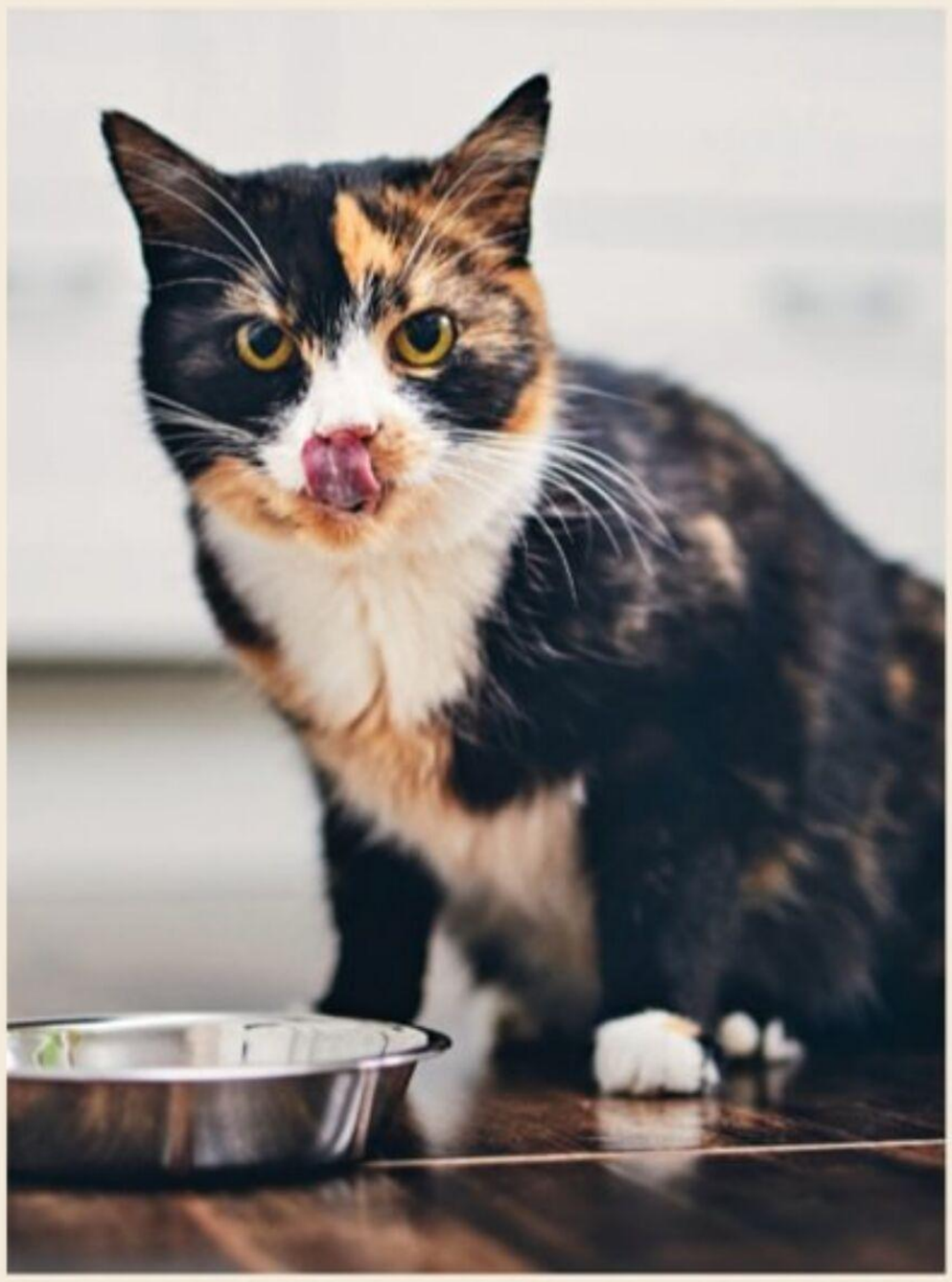
Their owners are smarter than dog owners

Have you ever suspected that people who hang out with slinky, clever, moody cats are actually smarter than everyone with a goofy, friendly-to-everyone dog? Your hunch was likely correct, according to a study carried out by Carroll University in Wisconsin. The study, from 2014, looked for personality traits in 600 college students that coincided with choices in pet ownership. Dog lovers tended to be more lively, but cat owners were "nonconformists" who preferred expediency to following the rules.

Cat lovers also scored higher on intelligence overall. So is the cat educating you, or do you just have to be smart to adequately care for such a mercurial animal? Professor Denise Guastello noted that the difference in temperament might be because of the different needs of the two animals. "It makes sense that a dog person is going to be more lively because they're going to want to be out there, outside, talking to people, bringing their dog," Guastello said. "Whereas, if you're more introverted and sensitive, maybe you're more at home reading a book, and your cat doesn't need to go outside for a walk."

In other words, cats are more suitable for bookish personalities who prefer the indoors, and dogs, which figure in far more romantic comedies than their competitors, are compatible with extroverts.

Fewer people also said they were cat fans—11 percent of the survey group, compared to 60 percent who identified as dog fans. That coincides with the smaller percentage of the population who are much more intelligent, charming, and successful, right? Asking for a friend. *—Kyle Chayka*



They enrich your golden years

People who are looking to stay healthy as they age may want to adopt a pet, according to data from the University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging.

For a survey in 2019, researchers polled about 2,000 U.S. adults from ages 50 to 80. Fifty-five percent said they owned at least one pet. Dogs were the most common, followed by cats and small animals, such as birds and hamsters. But no matter the type of animal, the vast majority of owners said their pets boosted their mental and physical health.

Nearly 90 percent of older pet owners said their animals helped them enjoy life and feel loved; roughly 80 percent said their pets reduced stress; and almost 75 percent said their furry friends provided a sense of purpose, according to the poll. In addition, 64 percent of pet owners—and 78 percent of dog owners—said their pets helped them stay physically active. Sixty percent also said their pets helped them cope with physical and emotional health issues.

People did report a few drawbacks to pet ownership, including difficulty traveling or leaving the house (54 percent) and financial strains (18 percent). Six percent of pet owners said they'd fallen or injured themselves as a result of having a pet—consistent with a recent study finding rising rates of fractures among elderly dog owners. Fifteen percent of pet owners, including 26 percent of those who said they were in fair or poor health, said their pet's health took precedence over their own.

Still, plenty of research has shown that just about anyone can benefit from their pet, since animals can lower stress, reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, and encourage physical activity. The poll suggests that pet ownership may be especially impactful for older adults, given how common loneliness and social isolation are within this age group.

Human social support comes with a host of health benefits—less stress, lower rates of chronic disease, and more—and research shows that interacting with pets can provide many of the same benefits. (Animals may even serve as a catalyst for human friendships since they often get caretakers out in the community, research shows.) If owning a pet isn't an option for some animal lovers, the report's authors recommend volunteering at an animal shelter, arranging pet therapy visits, or pet-sitting. *—Jamie Ducharme*

Breeds Apart

Each kind of cat comes with its own fascinating history as well as a distinctive set of personality traits.

BY BILL SYKEN

BRITISH SHORTHAIR

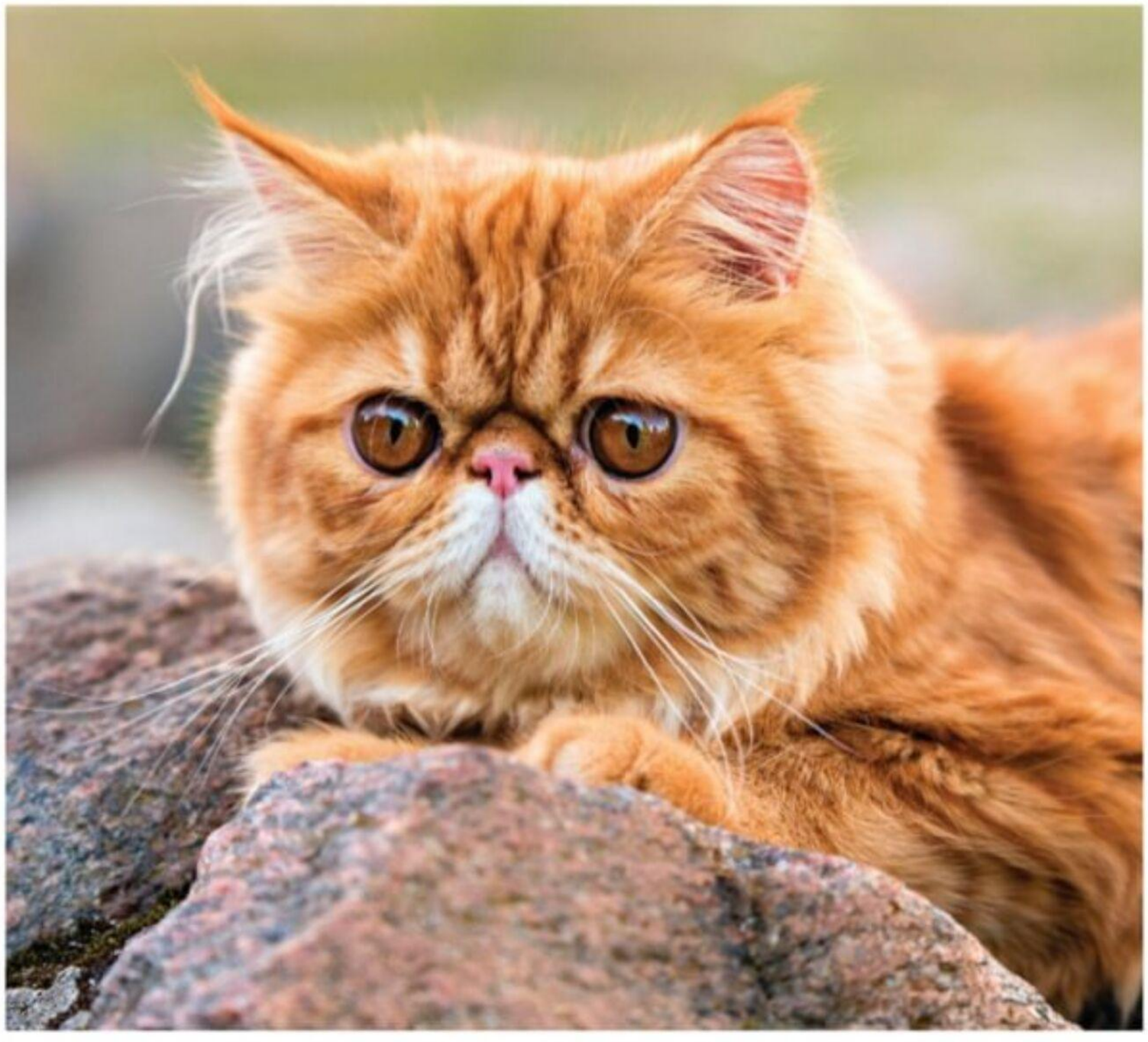
This ancient breed came to England by way of Egypt and Rome and enjoys a reputation as one of the gentlest cats around. A 2019 study in the journal *Nature* deemed British Shorthairs the least likely breed to act aggressively toward family members or toward strangers. The most famous British Shorthair is the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

ABYSSINIAN

If you're undecided about whether to get a cat or a dog, you could split the difference and go with an Abyssinian. These energetic and affectionate felines are regarded as the dogs of the cat world. It is the breed that looks like the cats most commonly seen in artifacts of ancient Egypt, and their reach expanded when they were brought home by British soldiers who had been serving in Africa in the 19th century.

BURMESE

No one will ever accuse these cats of being aloof. The 2019 study in *Nature* found the Burmese to be the least likely to be shy around strangers; and they are social enough that the International Cat Association recommends that if you live in a busy household, you should get two so they can keep each other company when their humans can't pay them any attention.

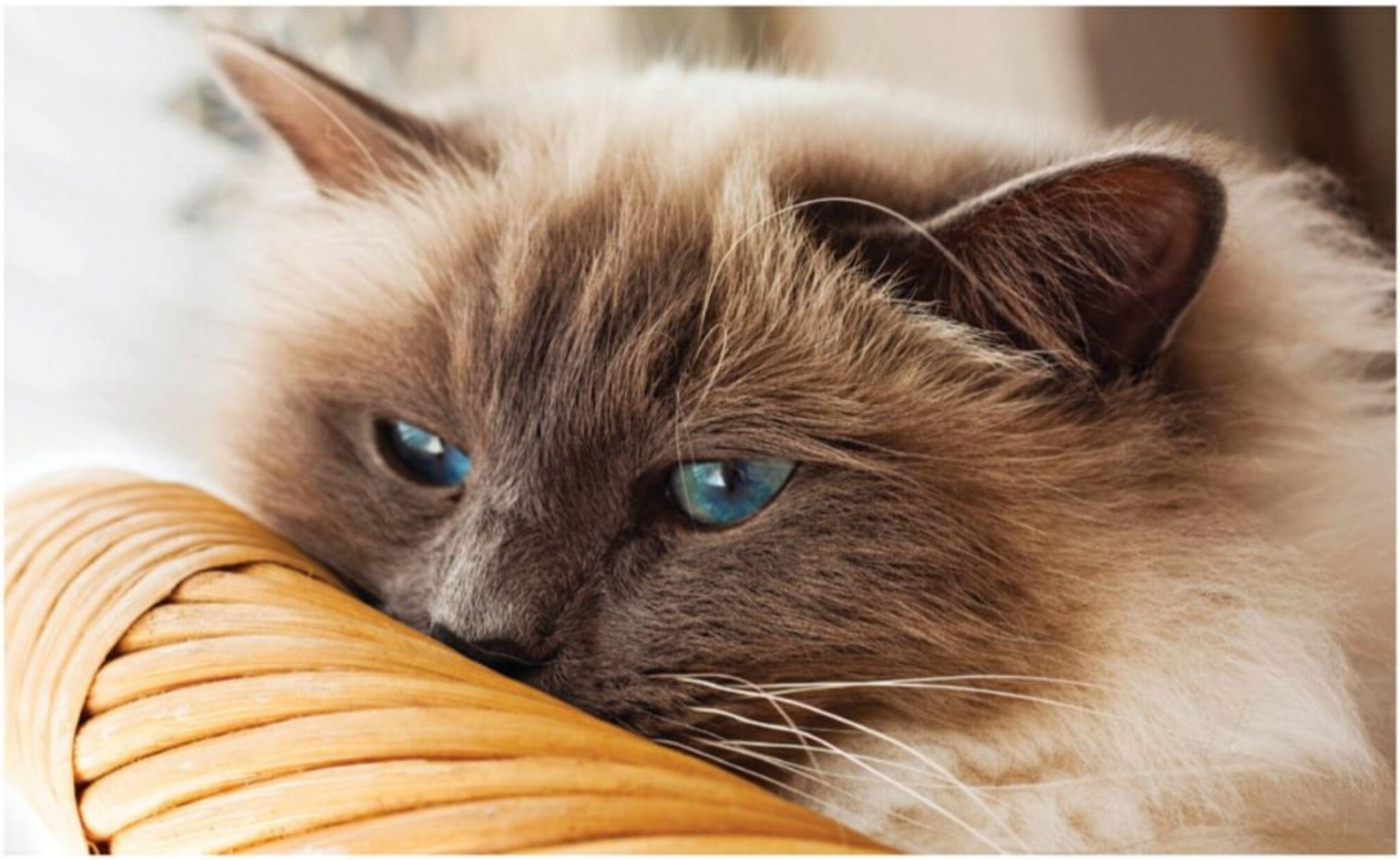


EXOTIC SHORTHAIR

In the mid-20th century, breeders created the Exotic Shorthair for owners who wanted a Persian but didn't want the hassle of all that hair care. This is why the breed, sometimes called "the lazy man's Persian," is quite popular. One note of caution: Those Persian traits continue to lurk in the gene pool, so if two Shorthairs mate, there's a 25 percent chance they will produce a long-haired offspring.

MAINE COON

Look at their fur and you can see where the myth that these cats are the result of interspecies mating with a raccoon might come from. This cat will spend time with you without demanding too much attention. Chef Bobby Flay's late Maine Coon Nacho is the namesake of his cat-food brand.



BIRMAN

At home anywhere, “their low maintenance and desire for companionship also makes them ideal for seniors,” according to the International Cat Association. The most famous Birman is Choupette, who is the pet of designer Karl Lagerfeld, and was the subject of tributes at the 2023 Met Gala (see page 78).

SIAMESE

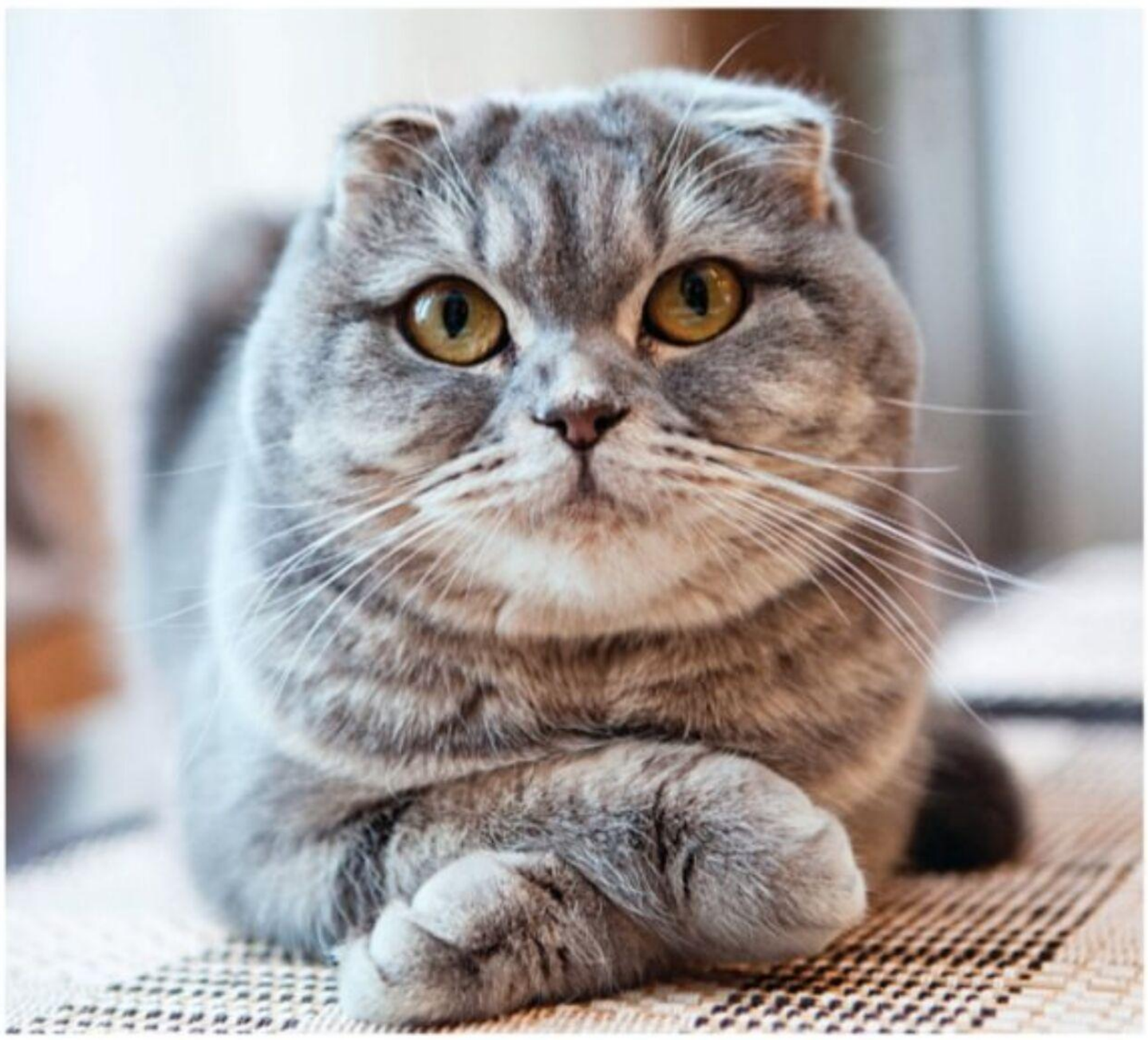
This ancient and personable breed first came to the United States in 1879, when an American Consul official in Bangkok gave one as a gift to President Rutherford B. Hayes. It may just be coincidence that Bob Dylan, in “Like a Rolling Stone,” warned of a diplomat “who carried on his shoulder a Siamese cat.”

PERSIAN

Though it has been overtaken in popularity by its easier-to-care-for cousin, the Exotic Shorthair, the Persian is still a favorite for many. They require daily brushing but reward the attention with their genial disposition. Their status received a boost in the 19th century from a famous fan, England's Queen Victoria.

RUSSIAN BLUE

These cats are the most likely to be shy around strangers, according to the 2019 *Nature* study. But once they get to know you, they'll open up and become regular chatterboxes. Russian Blue cats are also smart enough to learn tricks, such as opening doors and giving people a high five.



TURKISH VAN

Distinctive traits include spots on the head that match their tail color, a proclivity for swimming, and a mischievous streak that can make them “a handful,” according to the International Cat Association. They are loyal and intelligent but not super-mellow: Among the cat breeds studied by *Nature*, they are most likely to be aggressive toward strangers and other cats.

SCOTTISH FOLD

Their distinctive ears are the result of a genetic mutation, which traces back to Susie, a barn cat found in Scotland in 1961 by a shepherd named William Ross. All Folds alive today are descendants of Susie. These mellow cats, known for being close companions, are a favorite of many, including pop star Taylor Swift, who has two.

DEVON REX
This breed traces to a stray cat in Devonshire, England, in the late 1950s who gave birth to the first of these funky-looking felines. Their personality is "madcap," according to the Cat Fanciers' Association, which acknowledges they have been called a cross "between a cat, a dog, a monkey, and Dennis the Menace."

Their Hidden Language

Studies show that cats' meows contain meanings, and that cats also can understand at least some of what we say to them.

BY SARAH BROWN

When we listen to cats, can we tell what they want from those meows they so skillfully direct at us? Many people feel they understand what cats are saying when hearing them meow. However, under the scrutiny of scientific tests, it seems we may rely on more than just their meows to get the full picture. In a pioneering experiment, Nicholas Nicastro recorded the meows of cats in five different situations: requesting food, annoyed at being brushed, requesting attention, requesting to be let out, and distressed when traveling in a car. He played them back to people and discovered that, although they performed better than chance at identifying the meow contexts, without the added visual cues gained when seeing the vocalizing cat, people found this quite difficult. This conclusion was also reached by subsequent similar studies.

This suggests that cat meows simply grab a person's attention and convey the need or desire for something rather than actually conveying detailed information to humans about what they want. As Nicastro put it, cats may meow "to provoke, rather than to specify, a reaction." Once cats have used the meow to gain a person's attention, they generally use additional visual or tactile techniques for explaining what is so urgently needed, such as rubbing their head and flanks around our legs and then against the food cupboard, or sitting looking pointedly at the back door. For years scientists thought the same about dog barks. Gradually, though, researchers realized that the acoustic structure of barks varied according to the context in which they were made. For example, barks in response to the doorbell ringing are harsher, lower-pitched, longer, and more repetitive than those made when dogs are playing or left alone.

So, are cat meows really just meaningless attention-getting sounds? Like kittens with their squeaky mews, adult cats appear to have their own individual repertoires of meows. This is partly what

makes it hard for people to tell the contexts apart. Some scientists have suggested that these variations might be similar to the different dialects and languages of people. Nicastro's study dug a little deeper and discovered that, as with dog barks, the picture is not quite so straightforward. He found that experience with cats improves people's ability to identify meow contexts. A later study by Sarah Ellis and coresearchers also showed that cat owners are more successful at distinguishing meows when listening to recordings of their own cats rather than those of unfamiliar ones. Other researchers have found that female participants proved better at identifying different types of meow contexts, possibly related to their higher scores on level of empathy toward cats. All in all, the consensus is that identifying meows is hard, but not impossible. Over time, pet cats may learn to vary their meows as their owners become tuned in to their cat's individual sounds and can recognize the different meanings. Nicastro cites this as an example of "ontogenetic ritualization," a process during which members of two species gradually shape each other's behavior by repeating a social interaction.

If humans can learn to decipher meows as they gain experience with cats, then it seems likely that some real information is contained within this type of vocalization. Many scientists now agree that, while other species make different sounds to us, certain characteristics of vocalizations are similar across many animal "languages." Tamás Faragó and his coworkers showed that when listening to dog vocal expressions, humans use the same simple innate acoustic rules that they use for assessing the emotional content of another person's vocalizations. This taps into a concept first mooted by Darwin in 1872: "That the pitch of the voice bears some relation to certain states of feeling is tolerably clear." Processing of emotional content is therefore probably something that we naturally do without realizing it when listening to vocalizations from any other species, including cats.

Researchers have looked in more detail at the acoustic qualities of cat meows. One study found that meows recorded in a pleasant situation (receiving a snack) had higher average pitches compared with those recorded in an unpleasant situation (inside a cat carrier in a car). In a different study, Susanne Schötz and her team in Sweden also found that consistent subtle differences between meows in different contexts exist. They discovered that how cats are feeling affects both the pitch and the way it changes during the meow. So a positive meow (e.g., in greeting or to request food) has a pitch that rises and ends up higher, and an unhappy or distressed meow (e.g., when traveling in a cat carrier) has a pitch that falls.

Human listeners may struggle to distinguish the subtleties between two positive meows recorded in different contexts, such as "requesting food" and "requesting attention." However, another study by Schötz showed that, when asked to tell the difference between positive/happy (food/greeting) and negative/sad (at the vet) meows, listeners performed significantly above chance. As in Nicastro's previous tests, cat-experienced listeners were better at this than those with no prior cat experience. It seems we can learn to pick out basic emotional information when hearing meows.

In a different study, Pascal Belin and coworkers, looking at our perception of positive (food-related and friendly) and negative (distressed) cat meows, made an intriguing dis-

Cat owners proved to be better at discerning types of meows than people with no cat experience.

covery. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging, they monitored listeners' brain activity while they were played recordings of the meows. They found that even when listeners couldn't decide whether the meows were positive or negative, the sounds still registered differently within their brains. Negative vocalizations stimulated a greater response in regions of the secondary auditory cortex, whereas positive vocalizations stimulated greater responses in parts of the lateral inferior prefrontal cortex. Perception, if not recognition, of these positive and negative emotions appears therefore to be inbuilt—an interesting disconnection between brain activation and conscious behavior.

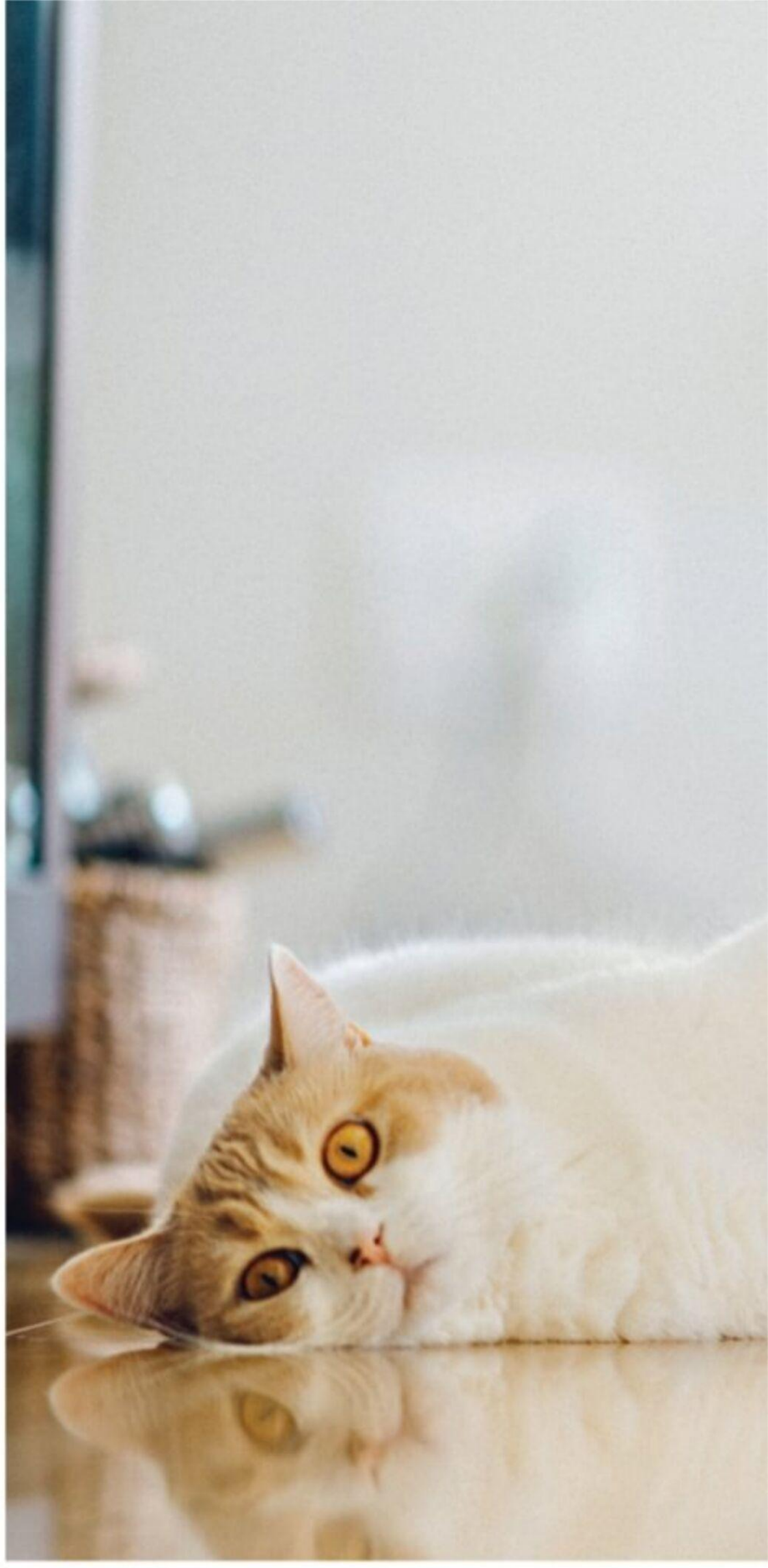
WE SEEM TO BE PARTICULARLY TUNED IN TO SAD vocalizations. A wide-ranging survey of people's impressions of their pets revealed that pet-owning adults find distressed-animal vocalizations sadder than adults without pets do. And cat owners are particularly sensitive to distressed-cat vocalizations. This sensitivity to "sadness" in cats may be the price cat owners pay for the development of a better understanding of feline vocalizations. This is not necessarily a bad quality—from a welfare perspective, it is important that we are tuned in as much as possible to any sadness in our cats, as they are notoriously good at hiding illness and stress.

There is one particular cat "vocalization" that people often describe as sad: the voiceless meow. So incredibly effective, it was the inspiration for Paul Gallico's amusing and charming book *The Silent Miaow*. Cats seem to reserve this one for moments when they most need to tug at their human's heartstrings. Requiring the cat to have already caught the person's eye, the silent meow involves maintaining pleading eye contact while performing a soundless meow. Gallico's playful advice to cats in his book

reads: "Don't overdo it but save it for the right moment." Cats are experts at this. A variation is what I describe as the "I can barely make any noise except this faint croaky squeak" version, which is almost as, if not equally, effective.

People love to talk—an observation evidently not lost on cats, given how creatively they have morphed their kitten calls into human-directed meows. People love to talk to their cats, too. Many owners converse with their cats throughout the day, chatting away as if to another person. In one survey, 96 percent of owners reported that they spoke to their cat every day, and 100 percent spoke to their cat sometimes. Most of those asked quite happily admitted that they confide in their cats, talking to them about problems and important events. When they have been out of the house, owners returning from a longer period of time away talk more to their cats than when absent for a shorter time, as they might with another person.

Just as house cats have modified their meows to a sweeter-sounding higher pitch when talking to us, many owners change the tone of their voices and the way they speak when conversing with their cats. Most people when questioned say they talk to their cat as if they were a person, usually a child. The result is reminiscent of the special way we talk to babies and young children. "Motherese," as it is known, has been much studied as a concept, mostly with respect to human babies. It is seen, or rather heard, across many languages and cultures, and spoken by both men and women, not just mothers. Such talk tends to have a higher and greater range of pitch than normal speech, is performed more slowly, and contains lots of repetition. When directed at babies, motherese may also consist of simplified and exaggerated elements of language such as elongated vowels: "How are yoooou?" Research has shown that pet-directed speech tends to lack the elongated vowels but otherwise bears striking similarities to motherese.



While it is unclear what, if anything, cats take from motherese-style talk, it does seem to get their attention, at least some of the time. Many scholars studying speech have surmised that altering our vocalizations in this way is necessary for animals to realize that we are speaking to them. One small study looking specifically at the reactions of indoor cats to different types of human speech found that they could tell the difference between speech aimed deliberately at them and the normal speech that people use with adults. However, this was only the case when the speaker was their owner; they could not tell the difference between the two types of speech when it was a stranger doing the talking. This highlights again the significance of the gradual ritualization of communication in cat–owner relationships, especially for indoor pet cats, who often experience less exposure to strangers.

We don't need to adjust our pitch for cats to actually hear us. Cats' hearing range is one of the widest tested in mammals, covering 10.5 octaves compared to our 9.3. They can hear similar low-pitch sounds to humans, but they have an upper range

One survey said that 96 percent of owners talk to their cat every day.

way beyond ours, enabling them to hear the calls of prey such as mice and rats. Then throw in their amazingly mobile ears that can rotate independent of each other, a full 180 degrees each, enabling them to locate sounds extremely accurately. They really have no excuse for ignoring us.

Cats often give a very good impression of not hearing a thing when we call, yet on closer inspection it appears they are really quite discerning of human voices. Researchers use the habituation/dishabituation technique to explore cats' reactions to different sounds. One such experiment, by researchers Atsuko Saito and Kazutaka Shinozuka, looked at cats' responses to different people calling their name. In a test resembling a kind of auditory identification parade, the cats listened to recordings of three strangers calling their name one by one, each separated by 30 seconds, followed by their owner calling their name. The strangers were all the same sex as the owner and were asked to call the cat's name in the same way as the owner did to make them sound as similar as possible. Analysis of the videos made of the cats while listening showed that their reactions declined with successive presentations of different strangers calling their name (habituation). However, when they heard their

owner call, their response increased again (dishabituation), indicating that they recognized their owner's voice. They responded not so much with any reciprocal vocalization or obvious physical communication, but more through subtle movements of their ears and heads that increased when they heard their owner speaking instead of a stranger.

Following on from this study, and once again using the habituation/dishabituation technique, Saito and coresearchers investigated cats' ability to distinguish their own names from four general nouns that were similar in construction and pronunciation when spoken. They found that cats, having gradually paid less attention to the normal words as they were played, showed increased response again on hearing their name spoken. That they can pick out their own name in this way suggests a level of vocal understanding in cats that is generally associated with dogs and their eagerness to listen, understand, and please us—qualities rarely listed for cats.

CATS QUITE OBVIOUSLY UNDERSTAND FAR MORE OF WHAT WE SAY THAN THEY ARE LETTING ON.

WHILE CATS MOSTLY RELY on their meows to communicate with people, they have a few other sounds with which to charm us, too. One of these is the trill. Reminiscent of the soft, gentle call used by mother cats to their kittens, this sound is often used by cats to greet people. It is sometimes heard as they approach their owner after a period away or in response to a greeting vocalization from a person. Cats often combine it with a meow to create a much longer sound. It is most definitely a happy, friendly vocalization and one that, as Paul Gallico so accurately observes, has the following effect on people: "For some reason or other it just seems to make them feel fine and puts them into a good humor."

Perhaps the most alluring sound cats make, however, is the purr. Mark Twain once said, "I simply can't resist a cat, particularly a purring one." For many years it was a mystery how cats even produced the sound, let alone what it actually meant. One early theory suggested that blood flowing through veins in the chest produced the purring sound. Scientists gradually realized that the sound emanates from the throat area. We now know that it is controlled by a neural oscillator, or "purring center," in the brain, which sends signals to the muscles of the larynx. These respond by rapidly opening and closing the space between the vocal cords known as the glottis, creating vibrations at a rate of 25 to 150 per second as the cat breathes in and out. The result is an almost continuous purring sound.

Exactly why cats purr remains something of a mystery. Able to produce the sound from early kittenhood, domestic cats first purr nestled in among their mother's fur while suckling, alongside any siblings they have. Later in life, they may purr when in contact with humans or other cats in friendly situations, when they are sleepy, or when they are warm and cozy. One study recorded the behavior of cats when their owner had been out of the home for 30 minutes compared to four hours. The researchers found that the cats purred significantly more on their owner's return when they had been absent for a longer period.

As always with cats, the story is not quite that simple. Domestic cats purr in many more situations than when curled up contentedly on a human's lap. In apparent contradiction to its occurrence in these peaceful situations, cats may also purr when in far more stressful situations, such as when visiting the vet. A survey taken within one veterinary clinic showed that 18 percent of cats purred while being examined by the vet—most definitely not a warm and cozy situation for a cat. Some cats also purr when in pain and even when dying. Although a definitive explanation of purring has remained elusive, it may in some way be self-soothing.

Whatever its natural purpose, domestic cats have certainly turned purring to their advantage in communication with people. Some purrs contain a higher-pitched meow type of vocalization within them, so that they sound more musical in nature. These tend to occur when the cat is hungry and trying to persuade their owner to feed them. Karen McComb and her team from the University of Sussex discovered this "cry embedded within the purr" by analyzing the acoustics of purrs recorded in different situations. When listening to recorded purrs, people can distinguish between normal and meow-containing purrs, finding the latter more urgent or demanding in nature and less pleasant than a regular contented purr. The meow component of these urgent purrs, just as with normal meows, has a

Cats might turn to meow-contained purrs when they have an urgent message for their person.

strong acoustic similarity to the cry of a baby, making these "food-soliciting" purrs difficult to ignore.

IT'S AN IMPRESSIVE ACHIEVEMENT. DOMESTIC cats, opportunistic as ever, have learned to adapt their calls of kittenhood to tap into our brains and tug at our unsuspecting heartstrings, unwittingly (or maybe not) masquerading as one of our own young. In return, we too have adapted our speech, often talking to them as if they really were our babies. We roughly get the gist of whether they are happy or sad. But most of the time, once they've got our attention with a meow, they need to physically show us what they're actually talking about. With some work, though, they can train us so we understand them better. Meanwhile, cats quite obviously understand far more of what we say than they are letting on, picking out the most important word (their name) from our constant chatter in hopes that it means something good is coming.

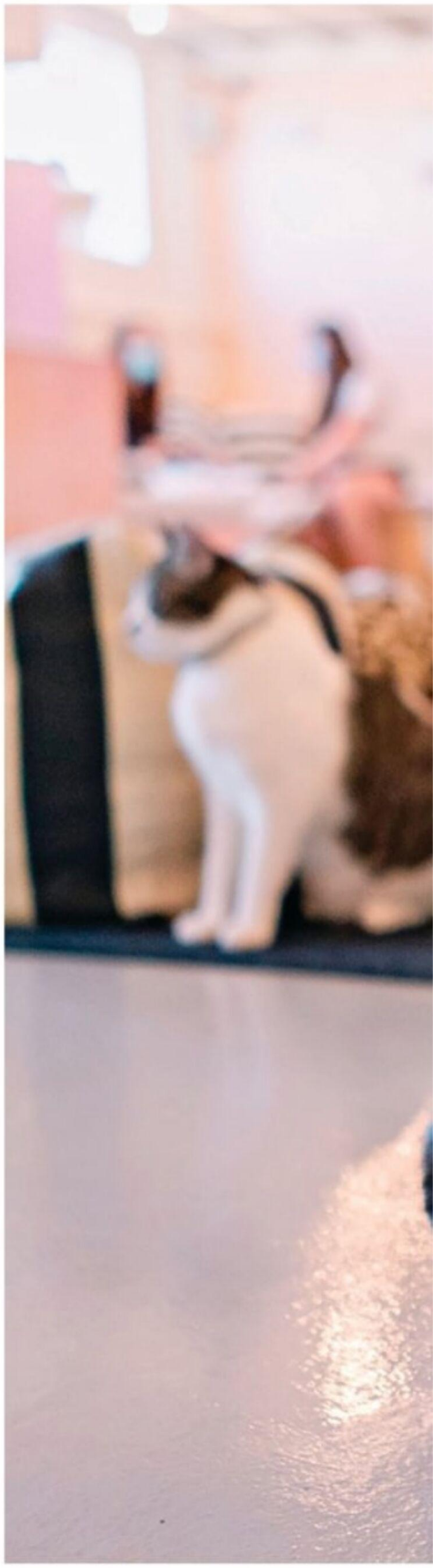
Is that it? Has cat–human vocal communication gotten as good as it will get, or is it still evolving? In evolutionary terms, cats and humans have had only a relatively short time to work on it—a mere 10,000 years since we started keeping each other company. Combine that with the fact that cats are an innately solitary species, undisposed to using their voices, and it's a miracle we can communicate vocally at all. Cats are surely unlikely to leave it at that when they have so much to say for themselves. ◻

From The Hidden Language of Cats: How They Have Us at Meow, *by Sarah Brown, PhD, published by Dutton, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House, LLC.* *Copyright ©2023 by Sarah Brown.*

Places to Meet Cute

The opening of America's first cat café in 2014 sparked an adoption-friendly trend.

BY KATY STEINMETZ



In 2014, dozens of Oakland residents queued up to partake of a new phenomenon that brought together cats and drip coffee. The founders of Cat Town café, a hybrid drinkery and "cat zone," held a grand opening for the nation's first permanent cat café—a furry fantasy others had tried to realize only to be derailed by funding problems and pesky health codes.

"The cat café, to us, is fun schtick on top of a serious rescue operation," said Adam "Catman" Myatt, a photographer who cofounded Cat Town with Ann Dunn, on the occasion of its precedent-setting opening. Disheartened by the cramped, scarring conditions at local animal services, Dunn started a nonprofit foster program in 2010 to help whiskery creatures find homes. That operation, Cat Town, became the springboard for the spot in downtown Oakland, where customers frolicked with adoptable felines while munching bagels.

"This is kind of my dream vision of what Cat Town would be like," said Julie Sammons, an employee at nearby University of California, Berkeley, as she stroked one cat in her lap and another sprawled preciously on a burlap cat bed beside her.

The success of this café turned out to be inspirational, showing that what had been popular in Asia could work in the Unites States. The planet's first cat café had opened in Taiwan in 1998 and then took

NEKO in Seattle was inspired by the owner's visits to cat cafés in Asia, where the phenomenon first took root.

further seed in Japan before coming here. Although Cat Town has since modified its facility and now focuses on cat adoption while subletting the café space to a new operator, many others have followed the example of their operation. There are currently 198 cat cafés operating in the Unites States, according to a listing on the website of the Mew Haven Cat Cafe in New Haven, Connecticut. States in which cat cafés are the most plentiful include California (20), Florida (17), New York (14), Pennsylvania (14), and North Carolina (12), but they can be found all across the country. Many have adorable names such as Don't Stress Meowt in Oklahoma City; Give Purrs a Chance in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia; and the Tipsy Tabby in New Market, New Hampshire. The coast-to-coast wave all began at this spot in Oakland.

On opening day for Cat Town, some locals came out of curiosity, others a devout appreciation of little purr boxes. Many admired the mission behind the venture and just as many lauded the decor, murals, and elaborate cat houses that placed the café firmly in the Bay Area. Two graffiti artists, known as Derp and T, painted one wall with images of boats in front of the Bay Bridge, and cats wove through miniature reproductions of the historic Tribune Tower and twin federal towers that make up Oakland's skyline.

"This is much nicer than I expected," said Ellen Breeden, a teacher in Oakland, "not as creepy as the ones in Japan I've seen on the Internet." When asked what brought her out for opening day, Breeden had a simple response: "I love cats." Others were slightly more specific in their praise of the animals. "They're soft and furry," said bookkeeper Marilyn Standley. "And they cover their poop."

To keep the building up to code, the cat zone and café had to be separated by a corridor with closed doors on either end. The ventilation system was built so that air only comes from the café into the cat zone, and not vice versa. Employees who worked in the café and those working in the cat zone could not mix, and Cat Town even has separate bathrooms—for those who have, and have not, entered the zone o' cats. Dunn says getting through the red tape wasn't

that hard, and neither was getting funding. After she and Myatt hit on the idea in December 2013, they quickly raised funds through donations and a successful Kickstarter campaign.

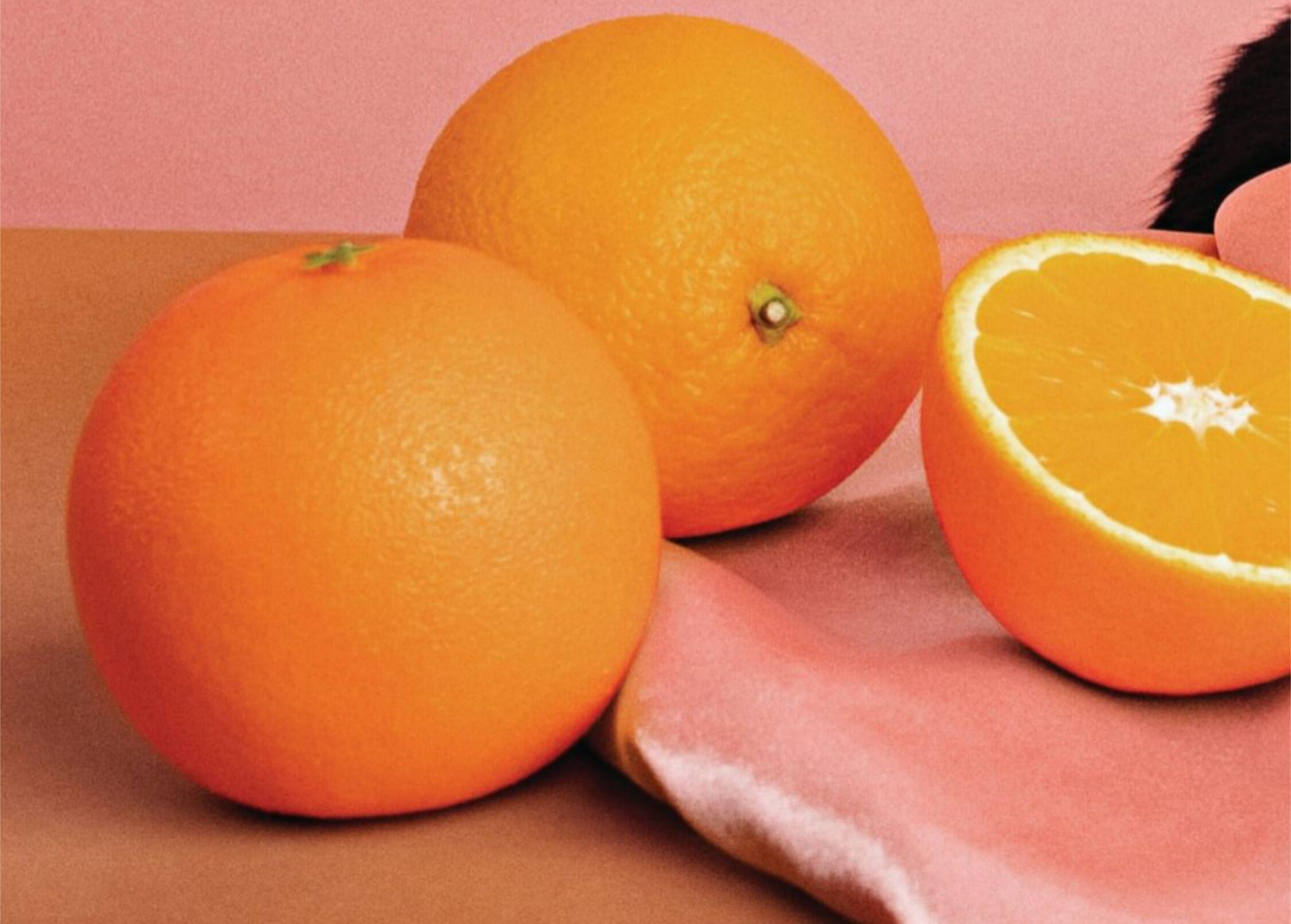
Not long after the café opened, animals were already flying out of the cat zone into loving homes. And some visitors who had come with no intention of adopting a cat were starting to have ideas, even despite lovers' allergies. Though no live camera for the cat zone had been set up by the grand opening, employees said that they were considering giving the world a view of Cat Town. Many homeless cats, Dunn says, just need to be in a comfortable environment so that potential adopters can see them thriving rather than huddled in a corner of a metal box. "He literally grew up in a cage," Dunn said, pointing to a playful tabby named Cooper, who found new owners right off the bat. "Though you'd never know it."

Many of the cat-human relationships being forged there were going to last quite a bit longer than a cup of coffee. It was clearly an idea whose time had come. □

America's first cat café, which opened in 2014 (top), doubled the size of its adoption center in 2017 (opposite). Above: Dancing Cat adoption lounge, where people can bring laptops and work, in San Jose, California.

FAMED FELINES

Whether through heroic deeds, proximity to power, or the sheer charm of their personalities, certain cats have separated themselves from the herd.



The photogenic Princess Cheeto is a social media star.

Profiles in Courage

Cats rarely get the glory, but some pets have stepped up in moments of crisis to protect people—and even dogs—in their homes.

BY BILL SYKEN

When people think of the heroes of the animal kingdom, cats are not the first to come to mind.

No, the acclaim tends to go to the dogs—which is fine. The term "glory hounds" exists for a reason: Dogs are the ones who sniff out bombs, serve in the army, provide the bulk of pet-therapy service, lead around the visually impaired, and in general are the animals who go get help for any mythical Timmy who happens to fall down a well. In Purina's Animal Hall of Fame, which celebrates heroic pets, their 191 inductees include 163 dogs but only 27 cats.

You would think a maker of both dog and cat food would have incentive to be evenhanded. But even if cats are outnumbered in that hall by about six to one, their mere presence is a reminder that heroic cats are out there. Look around and you'll find plenty of tales of feline valor and altruism.

Consider the story of Tara, a tabby who lived in Bakersfield, California. Tara saw an aggressive dog go after a four-year-old boy, dragging him and his bicycle to the ground in the driveway outside their house. Tara charged the dog and drove him backward, buying time for the boy's mother to swoop in and take him to safety. The 2014 encounter was caught on home security video, and Tara became a viral sensation. The boy's mother, Erica

Tara collected an award normally given to dogs after coming to the defense of a child.

Triantafilo, told the *Today* show, "It was pretty amazing to see a cat take on a dog and so selflessly just put herself out there and not worry about if she was going to get bit or injured herself. I think that dog did not know what hit him."

In Tennessee, a house cat did Tara one better by taking on a poisonous snake. Shelley, a shelter cat, was the lone companion of Jimmie Nelson, an 81-year-old stroke victim. One night Nelson heard rustling around the house and figured it was Shelley just playing around. But a few days later, Nelson found a dead copperhead snake on the kitchen floor. "On the side of the snake's neck and head there were claw marks and one big slash, so we knew right then that the cat had definitely killed the snake and brought it out a few days later to show it to her little dad," Nelson's daughter, Teresa Seals, told WHIS-TV. She further commented, "I think the Lord sent the cat to us to save my dad."

Speaking of lifesavers, there's the curious case of the cat who, best anyone can figure, dialed 911. In 2006, police in Columbus, Ohio, received a call on their emergency line. No one was on the other end, but they went to check it out and found Gary Rosheisen, who suffered from osteoporosis and the effects of ministrokes, lying on the floor after having fallen out of his wheelchair. Next to the phone was Rosheisen's cat, Tommy. The phone had 911 on speed dial, and it appeared that Tommy had hit the button with his paw. "I know it sounds kind of weird," Officer Patrick Daugherty said in an Associated Press report. Among the believers was Rosheisen himself, who had attempted to train Tommy to call 911. "He's my hero," Rosheisen said.

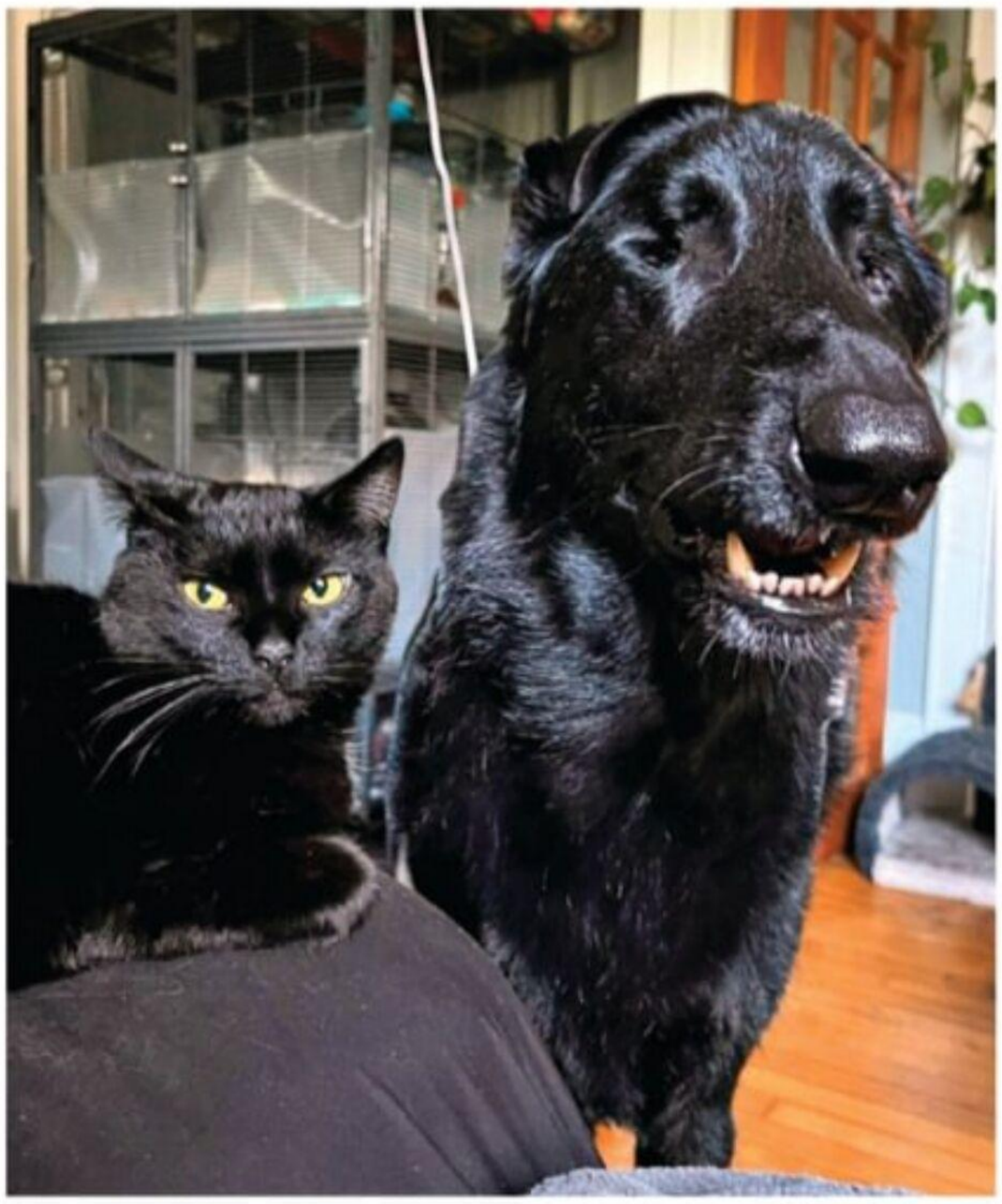
If you're detecting a theme of cats leaping into action when their owners are in trouble, you're not wrong. Sam Felstead of Stapleford in Nottinghamshire, England, credits her cat Billy for saving her life by waking her up in the middle of the night while she was having a heart attack. The cat jumped on her stomach and started meowing, possibly reacting to Felstead sweating profusely in her sleep. When she woke up her right side was numb, and she was able to make it to the hospital with the help of her mother. Felstead was kept in the hospital for three days after having an angioplasty. "I do think he saved my life and so does everyone around me," she said.

Nighttime was also the right time to leap into action for a 20-pound calico named Bandit. Bandit lives in Belden, Mississippi, and saved his owner from a world of trouble, according to the *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*. In the middle of the night, Bandit's owner, Fred Everett, 68, heard loud meows coming from the kitchen. Then Bandit raced to the bedroom, jumped into Everett's bed, and scratched his arm. None of this was normal behavior, so Everett turned on the light and went to investigate. That's when he saw two men who were trying to jimmy open the back door of his house with a crowbar. One of the men, Everett could see, was carrying a handgun. But when they saw Everett come into the kitchen, they ran off. "You hear of guard dogs," Everett

told the *Daily Journal*. "This is a guard cat."

Maybe the story that best shows cats' place in the animal kingdom is that of Satin—who did not fend off danger of any kind but displayed generosity and ingenuity on behalf of a dog in need. The story begins when Satin's owner, Robin Wagner, adopted Blaze, a German Shepherd mix with vision troubles. The dog and cat became friends, but the problem was that the 80-pound dog went blind and would accidentally step on Satin. So Satin began to meow when Blaze approached out of self-preservation. Then Satin began to meow whenever Blaze was about to bump into furniture, and she became something of a seeing-eye cat for Blaze. "I think Blaze going blind caused Satin and Blaze to become closer," Wagner, of Burlington, Vermont, told Southwest News Service, adding, "While she isn't the most affectionate and cuddliest of cats with us, she for sure tells Blaze she loves him, and it's the most beautiful thing to see."

A cat helping out a dog in distress—yes, maybe it's time to expand your notions about which animals can play the hero. ◻



Felstead with Billy (opposite); Everett and Bandit (top); and Satin and Blaze (above).

You Are Looking at a Decorated War Hero

Simon became the only cat to win high honors for military gallantry after surviving injuries he sustained on a British warship.

BY ROBIN HUTTON

CATS HAVE BEEN CLAWING THEIR WAY into wartime history for a long time. Take, for example, Crimean Tom, sometimes called Sevastopol Tom. In a Russian port town in 1854, he saved invading French and British troops from starvation by leading them to a secret cache of food.

Then there was Tiddles, who served several Royal Navy ships in World War II, along the way logging more than 30,000 miles.

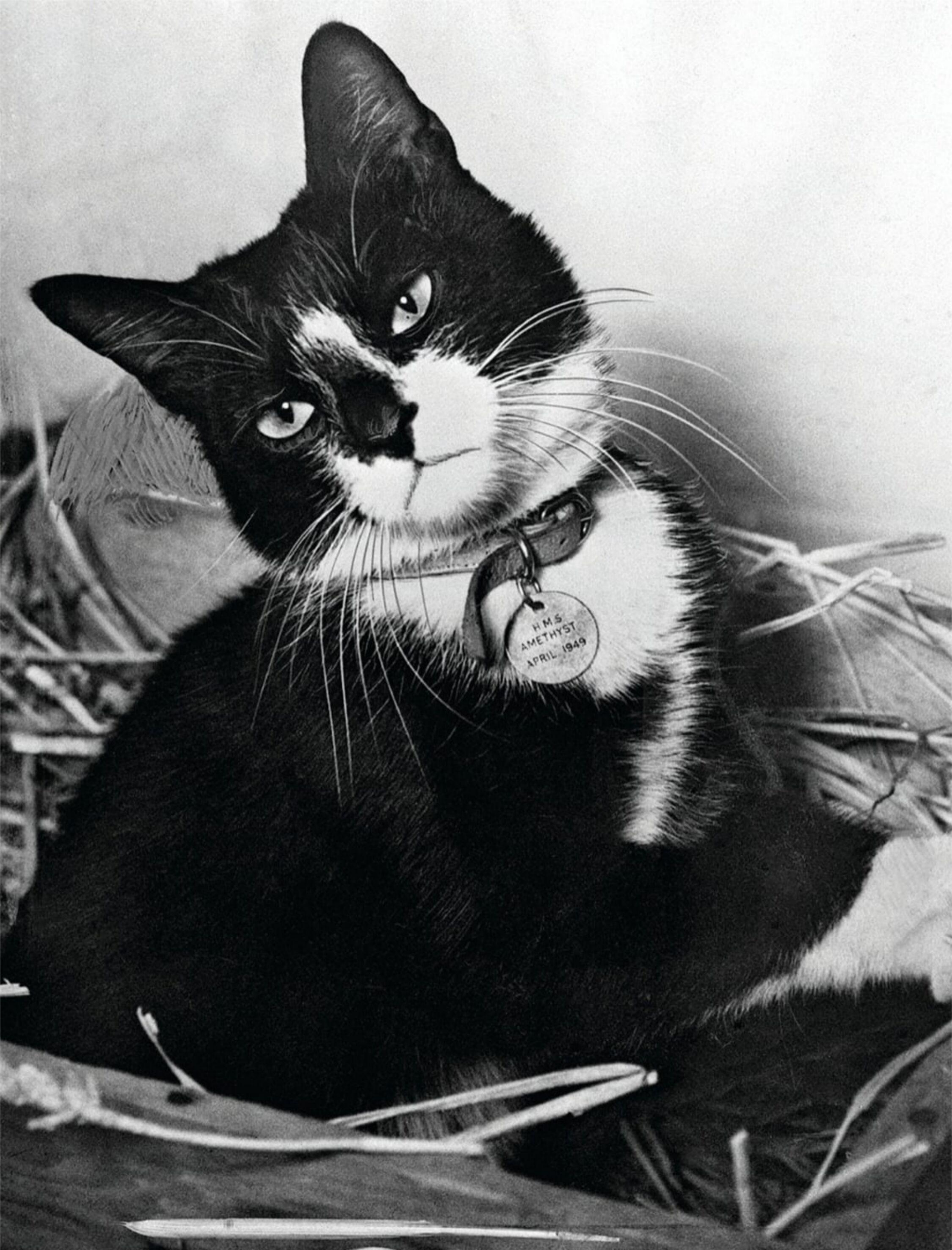
During the London Blitz in 1940, Faith the Church Cat seemed almost psychic in how she saved her newborn kitten from a German air raid that destroyed their home, St. Augustine's Church.

And as recently as 2004 in Iraq, Private First Class Hammer ingratiated himself to a U.S. Army unit and eradicated the mice that were contaminating their food supplies.

But none of those cats could boast of having a Dickin Medal, the highest British honor awarded for animal displays of bravery in battle. As of 2018, only one cat has ever earned the prestigious prize.

HIS NAME WAS SIMPLE: SIMON. HE WAS DISCOVered in March 1948 poking around the docks of Stonecutters Island in Hong Kong. Thought to be about a year old, the scrawny black-and-white tomcat was scrounging for food when a British sailor spotted him. Seventeen-year-old Ordinary Seaman George Hickinbottom decided a cat was just what the ship needed to get rid of its rats. The rodent infestation posed risks to onboard foodstuffs—and to the crew's overall health. So George tucked Simon (opposite) inside his jacket, smuggled him aboard the *Amethyst*, and hid the tomcat in his cabin.

In April 1949, the *Amethyst* was ordered to sail up the Yangtze River from Shanghai to Nanking, then relieve the H.M.S. *Consort* of her duties. China was in the midst of a bloody civil war between the communist insurgents of Mao Tse Tung's People's


H.M.S
AMETHYST
APRIL 1949

Liberation Army (PLA) and the ruling nationalist (or Kuomintang) party of Chiang Kai-shek; the *Consort* was long overdue for relief, having guarded the British Embassy for some time in case Mao's army took the city and forced an embassy evacuation.

A cease-fire agreement between the two sides was due to expire at midnight on April 21, with the communists demanding that the nationalists agree to their terms or else fighting would resume. Mao's PLA held the Yangtze's north side, and the nationalists controlled the south bank.

Because Britain had not taken a side in the Chinese conflict, no trouble was expected, and British officials believed the *Amethyst* could reach Nanking before the cease-fire ended. But on the morning of April 20, the *Amethyst* was still about 60 miles from the city when Communist fire resumed from the north shore. Explosions rocked the ship, with the bridge, wheelhouse, and low power room hit first. In all, the ship sustained more than 50 hits. Nineteen men, including the captain, were killed in the April 20 attack; 27 more were wounded. Eventually, the *Amethyst* took shelter in a creek a little way upstream. Negotiations with the Communists soon began for the release of the stricken, cornered *Amethyst* and its crew.

Where was Simon during the chaos and carnage? No one knows for sure, but when the shelling began, he likely was in the captain's cabin curled up in his cap. A Chinese shell blasted a huge hole in the nearby bulkhead, and four shards of shrapnel hit the defenseless cat in the back and legs as he bolted or was thrown by the force of the explosion. Simon's face was also burned, and his whiskers and eyebrows singed. The stunned cat apparently crawled into a corner, out of the way, and passed out.

FOUR SHARDS OF SHRAPNEL HIT THE DEFENSELESS CAT IN THE BACK AND LEGS AS HE BOLTED OR WAS THROWN BY THE FORCE OF THE EXPLOSION.

Simon was missing for several days before he staggered on deck and was discovered by Petty Officer George Griffiths, who gingerly picked the cat up and took him to sick bay.

The *Amethyst* mascot was in very bad shape—severely weak, dehydrated, and in pain from his injuries. Medical Officer Michael Fearnley went to work. He removed the shrapnel in four places and stitched Simon up before tending to his burned face. There was concern that the cat's hearing might have been damaged by being so close to the deafening blast. Besides all that, Simon's heart was also weak. Fearnley gave Simon only a fair chance of survival at best.

Dr. Fearnley suggested that Simon hang out in sick bay to help shore up morale among the remaining young crewmen, many traumatized by the attack, the loss of their crewmates, and the grief of having to witness 19 burials at sea. Because Simon had also endured the horrific attack and its aftermath, he was considered one of them.

Even so, conditions aboard the *Amethyst* began to seriously deteriorate. Because of dwindling food and water supplies, rations were cut in half. Nearly three months after the original attack, negotiations were deadlocked, at least in part due to the Communists' demand that the *Amethyst*'s men admit they had wrongly invaded national Chinese waters and fired first on Mao's army.

Between the standoff in talks and the ship's dangerously low fuel supplies, the captain was increasingly fearful. And his solution was old-fashioned and simple: make a run for it.

On the moonless night of July 30, with the merchant vessel *Kiang Ling Liberation* passing the H.M.S. *Amethyst* and heading down river around 10 p.m., he seized the moment and dared to attempt a 104-mile run to the open sea under cover of darkness.

The enemy's response from shore was less aggressive than expected; luck certainly seemed to be with the crew of the *Amethyst* that hot summer night. Almost five hours later, the ship rendezvoused with the H.M.S. *Concord* partway up the Huangpu River south of Wusong and was escorted the rest of the way. The captain sent a message: "Have rejoined the fleet south of Woo Sung. No damage or casualties. God save the King."

After being held hostage for 101 days, the crew's ordeal was over, and the *Amethyst* was cruising to Hong Kong.

News traveled fast as the *Amethyst* made its way to Hong Kong. Word of the ship's exploits spread, and the entire crew were hailed as heroes—including Simon. The tomcat became an international celebrity overnight, thanks to heavy coverage by the press and movie newsreels. An army of cameras and reporters recorded the ship's arrival in Hong Kong Harbor, and Simon posed for pictures

Simon received the Dickin medal and an honorary plaque that was presented by Amethyst *frigate commanders Alderman W. Harry Taylor (right) and Lieutenant Geoffrey Weston.*

with his shipmates during the celebration.

The captain replied to a request from the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals, which awards the Dickin Medal, asking for confirmation of Simon's heroic deeds. His testimonial letter reads, in part:

"For many days Simon felt very sorry for himself, nor could he be located. His whiskers, even now, show signs of the explosion.

"Rats, which began to breed rapidly in the damaged portions of the ship, presented a real menace to the health of the ship's company, but Simon nobly rose to the occasion and after two months the rats were much diminished.

"Throughout the incident, Simon's behaviour was of the highest order. One would not have expected a small cat to survive the blast from an explosion capable of making a hole over a foot in diameter in a steel plate.

"Yet after a few days Simon was as friendly as ever. His presence on the ship, together with Peggy, the dog, was a decided factor in maintaining the high level of morale of the ship's company."

On August 5, the Associated Press broke the news of the PDSA's unanimous decision to award Simon the Dickin Medal. Not only was he the only feline ever to receive a Dickin, he was also the only Royal Navy animal to earn the Dickin distinction.

All of this attention inspired fan mail for Simon—more than 200 pieces a day—along with gift cans of food and cat toys.

On November 11, 1949, Simon arrived home in England to another media frenzy, including LIFE magazine. He was placed in routine quarantine for six months, like other returning war animals, and the formal Dickin Medal presentation was set for December 11. Maria Dickin herself, along with the Lord Mayor of London, planned to attend. It was shaping up to be a grand and glorious affair.

But it was not meant to be. Two weeks before the presentation, Simon fell ill with a virus. He received treatment, including injections for a high fever and acute enteritis. But his war wounds had seriously weakened his heart.

Simon passed away on November 28, having crammed a lot of living into his two short years. As one tribute put it, "the spirit of Simon slipped quietly away to sea." The crew were heartbroken. Cards and letters arrived at the quarantine shelter "by the truckload." On its obituary page, TIME magazine featured Simon's picture beneath a simple headline: "In Honored Memory." □

Excerpted from War Animals: The Unsung Heroes of World War II *by Robin Hutton. Copyright (c) 2018. Used by permission of Regnery Publishing.*

THAT TIME THE CIA TRIED TO TRAIN CATS TO BE SPIES

Operation Acoustic Kitty was a real thing in the 1960s, and it went about as well as you might expect.

BY OLIVIA B. WAXMAN

The National Security Act of 1947 created the CIA, as well as much of today's national security-related bureaucracy. One of the more curious episodes in its long history was the time the agency investigated using cats to eavesdrop on private meetings.

In the mid-1960s, the CIA conducted a short-lived experiment nicknamed Acoustic Kitty.

The idea to bug cats is believed to have come from an attempt to listen in on an unidentified head of state who happened to be located in an area with a lot of feral cats. CIA operatives noticed that the felines tended to wander freely in and out of the premises.

"Whether the concept of an 'acoustic kitty' came from a case officer or a tech is lost to memory, but the idea launched a research project that generated unwarranted ridicule and accusations after public disclosure," according to *Spycraft: The Secret History of the CIA's Spytechs from Communism to Al-Qaeda*. The Office of Research and Development figured out a way to implant a three-quarter-inch transmitter in the loose, fleshy part at the back of a cat's neck, as well as a microphone in the cat's ear canal. A very thin, almost invisible wire connected the two devices. The size of the transmitter meant the device could hold only very small batteries and had space to record only a limited amount of audio. (One attempted solution was to give a cat a transmitter in its rib cage and an antenna in its tail, ex-CIA agent Victor Marchetti claimed in *The Wizards of Langley: Inside the CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology*.)

But a cat, though able to get into the desired location easily, didn't exactly make the best spy.

"They found [the cat] would walk off the job when he got hungry," according to Marchetti's account. In addition, such a cat couldn't just be let loose to wander untrained—their ability to focus on one sound over another was a big part of the reason they were desirable spies, but they had to be taught what to listen to. That training time went to waste during an exercise to see whether the cat would listen to people in a park without getting distracted. "They put him out of the van, and a taxi comes . . . and runs him over," Marchetti wrote. "There they were, sitting in the van with all those dials, and the cat was dead!"

Word of the program got out to the public in 2001, when the National Security Archive declassified memos on the Directorate of Science and Technology that were still heavily censored, but which included one dated 1967 titled "Views of Trained Cats": "The environmental and security factors in using this technique in a real foreign situation force us to conclude that, for our . . . purposes, it would not be practical," it determined, adding, "We satisfied ourselves" knowing that the technology "is indeed possible."

Presidential Pets

Willow, the tabby who caught the attention of First Lady Jill Biden, is the latest in a long line of felines who have prowled the red-carpeted halls of the White House.

BY OLIVIA B. WAXMAN

IT WAS BREAKING NEWS THAT MEWS: JANUARY 2022, THE BIDEN family announced that they had a new pet cat.

Hailing from a Pennsylvania farm, the tabby charmed First Lady Jill Biden by jumping onto a stage while she was giving a speech on the 2020 presidential election campaign trail. The Bidens named her Willow, after Jill Biden's hometown.

Willow (right) became the first cat in the White House in more than a decade, since India the black cat's tenure during the George W. Bush years, but is part of a long tradition. Abraham Lincoln is believed to be the first President to have cats as family pets in the White House. In the modern era, the Fords and Carters had cats, too. The Clintons' cat, Socks, was a rescue, having come from Chelsea's piano teacher, who found two stray kittens under her home.

(In 1998, the Associated Press captured footage of a tense encounter between Socks and the Clintons' Labrador, Buddy. Press secretary Mike McCurry joked that Middle East special envoy Dennis Ross might need to be called in to keep the peace.)

And we may never know exactly how many cats have lived on White House grounds in a non-pet capacity, as historically cats have served as working animals used for rodent control, points out historian Katherine C. Grier, author of *Pets in America: A History.*

During President Taft's administration, cows named Pauline Wayne and Mooly Wooly provided milk and cream for the White House kitchen. And Teddy Roosevelt's White House was practically a zoo, where first cats Tom Quartz and Slippers lived alongside a one-legged rooster, a lizard named Bill, a small bear named Jonathan Edwards, and five guinea pigs with names like Father O'Grady and Fighting Bob Evans. The tenure during the Biden administration of Major, the German Shepherd—who had to move out of the White House in October 2023 after a series of biting incidents—echoed the exile of Teddy Roosevelt's Boston bull terrier Pete, who repeatedly bit and ripped staffers' and visitors' pants, including those of the French Ambassador.

The long list of presidencies with a feline presence includes those of Coolidge, Kennedy, Ford, Carter, and Reagan. Presidential pets can keep their owners company, and they can also help Americans relate to presidents and are "a way to see them as someone closer to you," says Andrew Hager, who writes for the Presidential Pet Museum website and is the author of *All-American Dogs: A History of Presidential Pets from Every Era*.

Time will tell how much influence the Bidens' cat will have. Warren G. Harding's dog Laddie Boy, by some measures the first celebrity presidential pet, attended cabinet meetings and was hounded by report-

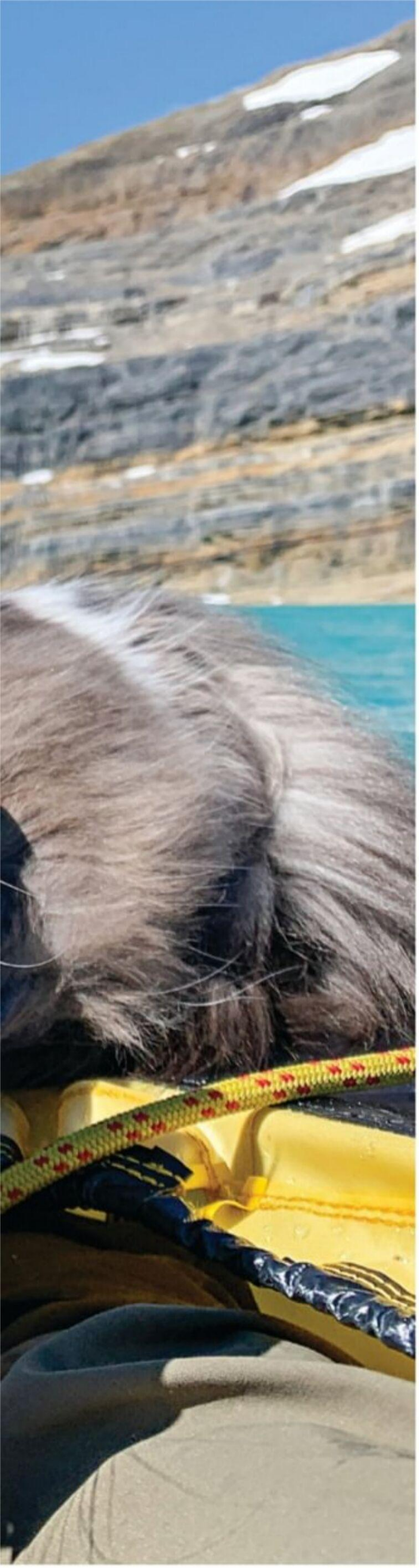
Clockwise from far left: Calvin Coolidge with Tiger; Caroline Kennedy with Tom Kitten; Nancy and Ronald Reagan with Cleo and Sara; Susan Ford with Shan; Bill Clinton with Socks; Amy Carter with Misty Malarky.

ers who regularly covered his whereabouts. During World War II, Franklin Roosevelt's dog Fala was the face of a PSA encouraging Americans to donate their dog toys to scrap-rubber collections. Fala received letters, too—enough to fill five document boxes.

But just as presidents are regularly the target of partisan attacks, so too are presidential pets. Responding to Republican claims that Roosevelt left Fala behind on a 1944 trip to Alaska's Aleutian Islands and then spent millions of taxpayer dollars to return him to the White House, FDR denied the rumors forcefully in a speech: "Fala resents this. When he learned that the Republican fiction writers had concocted a story that I had left him behind on an Aleutian Island and had sent a destroyer back to find him—at a cost to the taxpayer of two or three or twenty million dollars—his Scottish soul was furious!" Some experts credit the speech with helping FDR win a fourth term.

And, in the grand tradition of presidents promising to represent all Americans regardless of party, many have reached out to cat people and dog people alike by having cats and dogs together as pets in the White House—for better or worse. With Willow in proximity to the most powerful man in the country, she may help cat people on both sides of the aisle, even just for a moment, to transcend paw-tisan politics. □

Rex Specs



Meet Gary, Travel Influencer

The Instagram account of this intrepid rescue cat has his half million followers watching every snowy pawstep.

BY MELISSA LOCKER

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A MEMORABLE DESTINATION TO WHILE away your vacation days, perhaps Gary can point you in the right direction. This travel influencer has one of the web's most enviable Instagram accounts, filled with images of Gary on kayaks in pristine waters, romping through the snow surrounded by soaring mountain peaks, and him and his friends in gorgeous natural environments. While many social media influencers fill their feeds with quirky or playful selfies, there are no selfies on Gary's feed. That's because Gary is a cat.

Specifically, Gary is an eight-year-old rescued domestic long-haired "meowtain lion" who was adopted from the Calgary Humane Society and now lives and hikes in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Whereas most cats are content to stay indoors and look for warm laps and fishy treats, Gary enjoys the great outdoors. "Gary's a pretty chill cat for sure," said Gary's human companion, James Eastham, who shares their adventures on Instagram at Great Grams of Gary.

Gary's outdoor adventures started when he tried to make a break for the great outdoors from his nice indoor life. "We decided that if he wanted to be outside, he would have to learn to walk on a leash," Eastham said. "Shortly after, we moved to the mountains and continued training him to walk outside. We started with small outings into our yard and went

farther and longer as he got more confident outside. Now we've worked our way up to him being comfortable on overnight trips, paddling, and this winter, even some very mellow skiing!" While Gary's chill personality may make him a natural for nature walks, Eastham believes that "with some patience, most cats can be trained to be outside." He does recommend that "free-roaming cats" be kept on a leash to prevent injury to the cat or to the local bird and small mammal populations.

In his Instagram feed, which has 529,000 followers, Gary can be seen exploring snowy peaks in a warm ski jacket, wearing sweet goggles while sitting on an iced-over lake, happily walking on a leash during his outdoor adventures, or posing for pictures with his canine friends. "Adventuring does seem to have been good for him," says Eastham. "He used to be pretty timid and he's gotten much more confident around new people since we've been going out together. He's even gotten a bit friendlier, though he's still not exactly what I'd call cuddly."

Even the most cursory perusal of Gary's Instagram feed will prove that the cat is an inspiration to anyone who thinks they aren't interested in venturing into the wild. After all, if a cat can wear goggles while walking on an icy lake, so can you. And don't worry; Gary's fame hasn't gone to his head. "Gary hasn't really changed that much," says Eastham. "He's still a cat and mostly only concerned about having a full bowl of food and enough treats in a day." Gary, it seems, is a very relatable Instagram influencer. □

The Canadian Rockies, the site of his outdoor adventures, may have no greater ambassador than Gary.

TEN MORE INSTAGRAM STARS TO KNOW

Between their poses and their costumes, some cats—including a couple of self-proclaimed princesses—have built online followings that are truly royal.

BY AVA ERICKSON

1. Nala (@nala_cat)
With 4.5 million followers, Nala is the current Guinness World Record holder as the most-followed cat on Instagram. Since the account's founding in 2012, nala_cat has forged endorsement deals with countless brands including Friskies, the ASPCA, and even Hulu, and has made appearances at influencer events like VidCon. Nala is a Siamese–tabby mix known for her blue, slightly crossed eyes.

2. Princess Honeybelle (@princesshoneybelle)
She is both a cat baker and a fashion influencer. The account features adorable videos in which Honey "helps" her owner make desserts and coffees while rocking a mini chef's hat. When she's not baking, you can find Honey showing off her designer clothes to more than 250,000 followers.

3. Summer (@summerstavels)
Summer is a jack of all trades: therapy animal, show cat, influencer. With more than 100,000 followers on Instagram, Summer's account often posts stories about her time as a therapy cat, visiting assisted-living facilities, hospitals, and colleges. You can also find her learning new tricks and rocking themed costumes.

Princess Cheeto

4. Nile (@nile_sphynx)
This sphynx cat is the father of six babies with his kitty partner, Nyla. The account, which has over 100,000 followers, posts photos and videos of the family of sphynx, which are known for their hairlessness.

5. Mr. ViVo (@mco_vivo)
He may look like a lion (or a wolf), but he is actually a purebred black smoke Maine Coon. The giant cat is photographed for Instagram by his cat dad, who takes dark and elegant photographs and videos of Mr. ViVo for his 376,000 followers.

6. Suki (@Sukiicat)
This Bengal is known for her cat parent's stunning photography and outdoor adventures. The account, which has almost 2 million followers, frequently posts photos of Suki exploring incredible locales at home in Alberta and abroad.

7. Ivar (@ivartheincredible_blindcat)
Recognizable by his strange wide-eyed look, Ivar has garnered 330,000-plus followers on Instagram. His account often features videos of him and his cat siblings, as his owner is known for adopting cats with disabilities, including Jenni and Fred, who have tibial hemimelia, and Toad, who has radial hypoplasia.

8. Princess Cheeto (@princesscheeto)
Pop art–style photos are Princess Cheeto's trademark. The colorful posts feature the tuxedo cat posing with themed props or backgrounds. One of the page's most popular posts features Princess Cheeto as a piece of sushi, which her owner calls Susheeto.

9. Atchoum (@atchoumthecat)
Named after the French word for *atchoo*, a sneeze certainly sums up this guy's appearance. The Persian cat, who boasts more than 650,000 followers, has hypertrichosis, sometimes called werewolf syndrome, which causes wild hair growth, especially around his face and paws.

10. Hosico (@hosico_cat)
With almost 2 million followers, Hosico has been famous since he was just a kitten. Fans of the account have likened the fluffy Scottish Straight from Russia to Puss in Boots, Garfield, and even James Corden. He's so popular that he has an online shop that sells Hosico-themed toys, calendars, and pillows.

US & THEM

Whether it's dressing them in costumes or lionizing them in works of art, the affection people have for their cats can lead to special results.

This feline was featured in the annual cat fashion show at New York's Algonquin Hotel.

Why Cat People Rule

Celebrities such as Taylor Swift and Robert Downey Jr. love the animals, although less than flattering stereotypes about cat owners have proved persistent.

BY COURTNEY MIFSUD INTREGLIA

IF YOU EVER RUN INTO A PERSON WHO HAS A NARROW VIEW OF what it means to be a cat person, there's plenty you could tell them to open their mind.

For example, you might mention that Nikola Tesla, best known as the inventor of alternating current electricity and also the namesake of Elon Musk's electric car, happened to be gaga about his cat, who was named Macak. "I was the happiest of all, the fountain of my enjoyment being our magnificent Macak—the finest of all cats in the world," Tesla wrote in a letter to a young admirer in 1939. "I wish I could give you an adequate idea of the affection that existed between us. We lived for one another. Wherever I went, Macak followed, because of our mutual love and the desire to protect me."

Tesla is just one of many historymakers with a cat by his side. Abraham Lincoln's résumé includes the following: 16th president of the United States, deliverer of the Gettysburg Address, signer of the Emancipation Proclamation, and over- the-moon cat lover. According to Lincoln's wife, First Lady Mary Todd, cats were her husband's only hobby. And Treasury official Mansell B. Field wrote, however unpleasantly, in his memoirs that Lincoln "was fond of dumb animals, especially cats. I have seen him fondle one for an hour. Helplessness and suffering touched him when they appealed directly to his senses,

or when you could penetrate through his intelligence to them."

Then there's Mark Twain. He professed to love cats more than people. "If man could be crossed with the cat," he once wrote, "it would improve man, but it would deteriorate the cat."

More contemporary examples abound, too. For Taylor Swift's 30th birthday in 2019, she received a cake with her three kitties, Meredith Grey, Olivia Benson, and Benjamin Button on top. Then there's Iron Man himself, Robert Downey Jr. He and his wife, Susan, have two cats named Monty and D'Artagnan, respectively. During a 2011 interview with *Men's Fitness*, Downey talked about how he came to love his cats, who were rescues: "I would kill for these young, sweet little feline souls, these two boys. I would protect them with my life. Eighteen months ago, I'm saying, 'I don't want any rescue pets within 10 yards of either of my residences. I'm sorry. I don't want some, like, tripod, abused animal.' I was adamantly opposed to the whole idea. And now I couldn't imagine living without them."

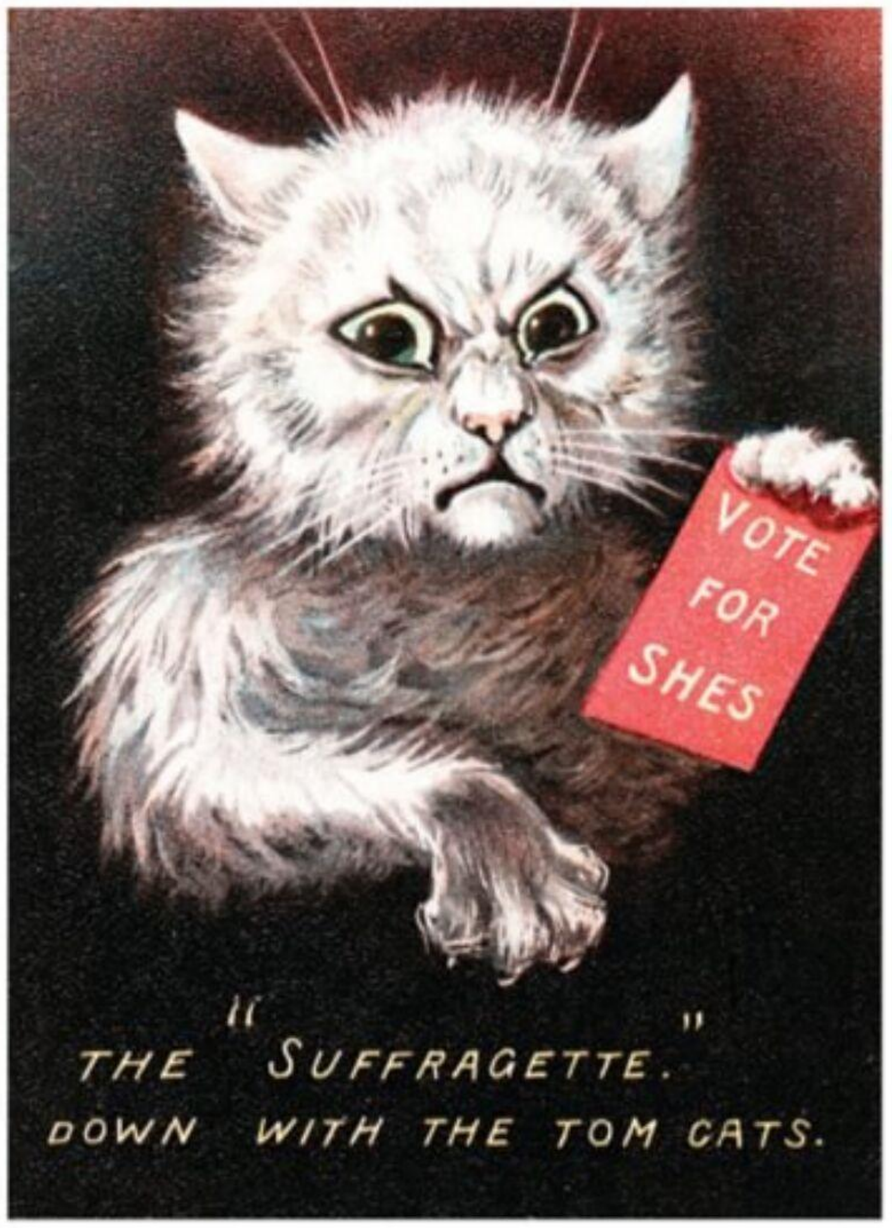
Suffice to say, if you wanted to take the name-dropping route to build up the reputation of cat people, you have plenty of options.

Science has also taken up the question, and while their findings about what it means to be a cat person don't entirely shatter stereotypes, they do provide a nuanced understanding.

Samuel D. Gosling, a social psychologist at the University of Texas, studied the personality traits of self-identified "cat people" and compared them to "dog people." In 2010, he asked them to rate themselves in an online survey in five categories—openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

The researchers concluded that, at least according to themselves, dog people tend to be more extroverted, agreeable, and conscientious. Cat lovers, meanwhile, were more likely to be neurotic, but were also more open to new experiences. "I wasn't surprised by the findings," Gosling told the *Guardian* this year. "If you think about the role that dogs and cats play, they afford different types of interaction. If you like to go walking and get out and about, a dog is a more obvious choice. But if you are more introverted and like to sit in a chair and spend time at home, cats demand less social interaction."

A 2014 study from UC Davis veterinary school looked at the same five personality traits, and its findings generally lined up with Gosling's. But as study leader Mikel Delgado noted, research like this isn't perfect. "Most of us are doing research on a limited budget, and we are doing survey research," said Delgado. "The people who are going to sit down and fill out a long survey about their pets are probably going to have a much higher level of attachment to their pet than the average owner."



Twain (opposite) loved cats, but Pope Gregory IX (above, left) declared them Satanic. An anti suffrage poster from 1905 (above, right).

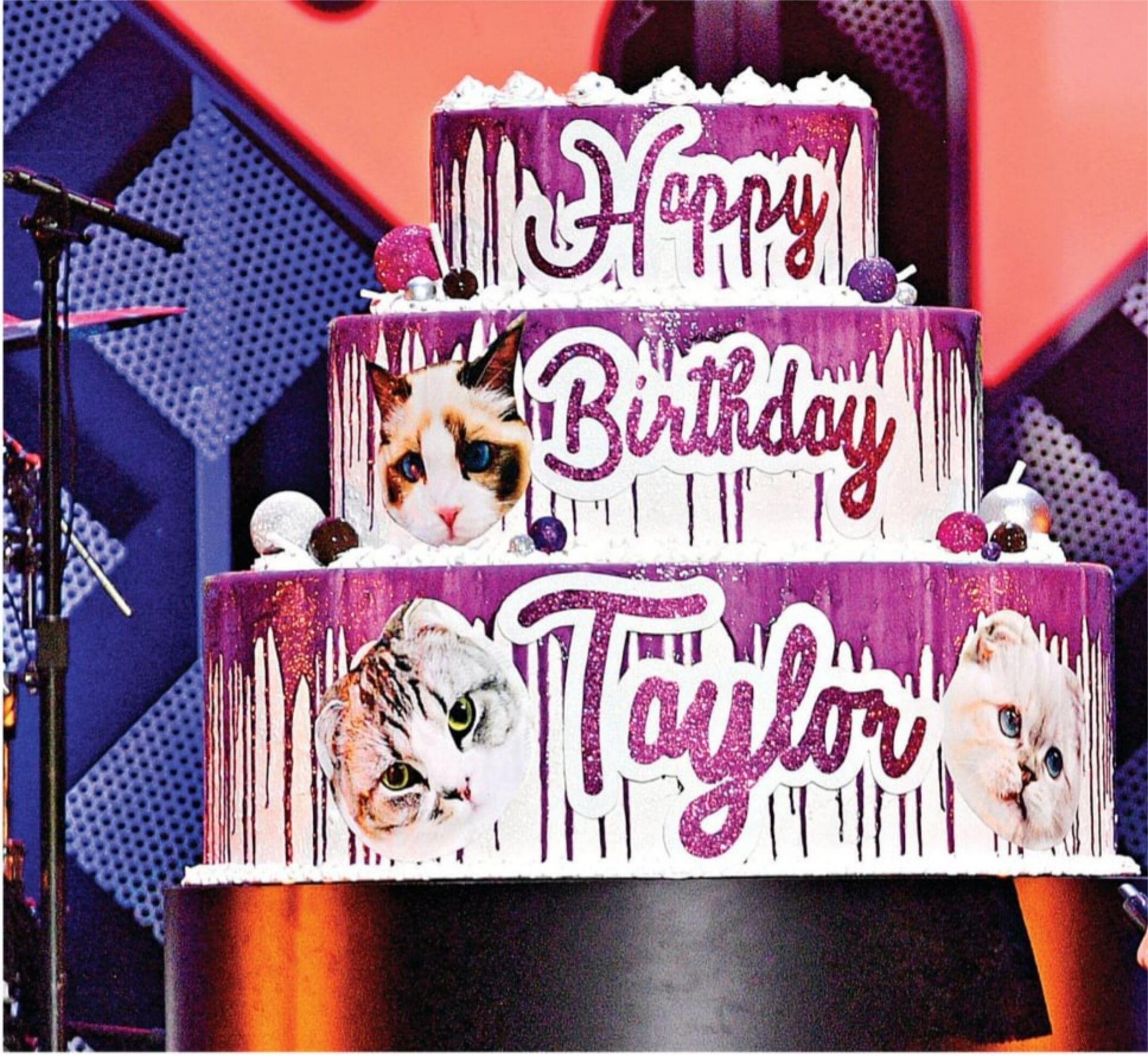
Gosling posited that there might be a performative aspect to whether a person chooses to be a dog person or a cat person. Do people choose those pets because their personalities drive them in that direction, or do they have a preference because they want to project an image to the world? "We choose things because they have symbolic value, because they send value to other people," Gosling told The Cut in 2016. A person who wants to broadcast an interest in film, for example, may buy physical copies of Blu-rays rather than streaming them on Netflix. "You could quite reasonably think of dogs and cats that way, too."

In 2015, a pair of researchers from the University of Melbourne published a paper in *Anthrozoös*, a journal dedicated to the interactions between people and animals, and found some evidence for "a reciprocal relationship between the needs of the owner and the dispositional characteristics of the pet." The researchers surveyed about 1,000 people, and dog owners scored higher on competitiveness and "social dominance orientation," meaning that they preferred a pet who was more submissive to its owner and followed commands. By this same logic, cat owners—who cared less about being top dog, according to the study—would be more okay with having a pet that's more aloof.

According to Gosling, though, trying to put cat or dog lovers into certain personality "buckets" says more about human nature. "We're naturally primed to be interested in other people," Gosling says, so "we use these sorts of shortcuts—these stereotypes, essentially—to try and make that job a simpler task."

The dark side of stereotypes, of course, is that they can promote derogatory images, and that certainly has happened with cat people. The typical "cat lady" as seen in the media is usually older, unkempt, alone, and barely holding it together. On *The Office*, cat-obsessed Angela monitors her pets via nanny cams at work, sometimes keeping them in filing cabinets, and complaining about the lack of "cat maternity" leave at Dunder Mifflin. When Robert De Niro hosted *Saturday Night Live* in 2004, he portrayed a completely bonkers cat lady. *The Simpsons*' universe includes Eleanor Abernathy, a.k.a. the Crazy Cat Lady, who, after Lisa Simpson muses in one episode, "Can anyone who loves animals so much really be crazy?" responds by throwing cats at Lisa while screaming gibberish.

But the modern trope has surprisingly longstand-



ing and insidious roots. To some, cats were seen as satanic, and the women who owned them were far worse than offbeat.

When the Roman Catholic Church sought to rid the world of non-Christian gods in the mid-13th century, Conrad of Marburg, the papal inquisitor of Pope Gregory IX, believed that cats were Satan in a fur coat and presented Gregory evidence of it that was obtained through torture. Pope Gregory issued a papal bull declaring that cats bore Satan's spirit, which subsequently led to huge numbers of cats being killed throughout Europe. Another official church document called "Vox in Rama" was issued by Pope Gregory on June 13, 1233. "In it, black cats were declared an incarnation of Satan," wrote Layla Morgan Wilde, author of *Black Cats Tell: True Tales and Inspiring Images*. "The decree marked the beginning of the inquisition and church-sanctioned heretic and/or witch hunts. Initially it was designed to squash the growing cult of Luciferians in Germany, but quickly spread across Europe."

In 1486, the landmark medieval treatise on witchcraft, *Malleus Maleficarum* (a.k.a. *The Witch Hammer*), was published. The writer, German churchman Heinrich Kramer, describes how three witches turned themselves into cats, attacked a man on the street, and accused him of assault in court, showing marks on their bodies as evidence. His views on eradicating witches were so extreme that the Catholic church couldn't support them, but his book was still embraced by zealots of the time.

Swift's birthday cake in 2019 included images of her three cats (left); De Niro performed a "Cat Lady" sketch on Saturday Night Live.

Fast forward to the 18th century and, while cat ladies were no longer seen as witches with demonic familiars, new stereotypes arose. It was during the Victorian Era that owning cats became a sign that a woman was an old maid. "Old maids and cats have long been proverbially associated together, and rightly or wrongly, these creatures have been looked upon with a certain degree of suspicion and aversion by a large proportion of the human race," wrote a journalist in the *Dundee Courier* in 1880.

In the 1900s, as women inched closer to gaining the right to vote, the cat-lady cliché became a harmful tool in anti-suffrage propaganda. Opposing propaganda used images of cats to portray women as lonely and trifling—exactly the type of person you wouldn't want voting.

Today's pop culture portrayals of crazy cat ladies might seem toned down when you consider how the trope has evolved from its origins. But it is still far from the truth.

In fact, there is much research showing that although cats might be bad for our furniture, they can be great for our mental well-being. According to another study in *Anthrozoös*, cat owners have better psychological health than people without pets. When surveyed, the cat owner participants claimed to feel more happy, more confident, and less nervous, and to sleep, focus, and face problems better. Cats purr with a consistent pattern and frequency between 25 and 150 hertz. Vibration therapy uses whole-body vibration to enhance physical health and overall well-being.

Another piece of evidence I feel compelled to mention: the reality of my life. I can attest that all of the feline fanatics I am close with are smart, career-driven, and overall happy people. Even though I don't currently have a pet, I too am a cat person. My childhood home had no fewer than four cats at any given time, including my sweet tortoiseshell cat, who filled my life with joy for 14 years. And whenever I'm visiting a home with a cat in it, I'm sticking by its side. And my fellow cat people and I are in good company because, as Mark Twain reportedly once said, "When a man loves cats, I am his friend and comrade, without further introduction." ◻

Looking Like the Cat's Pajamas

Here's why the celebrity fashions at the 2023 Met Gala took a decidedly feline turn.

BY MARIAH ESPADA

THE THEME OF THE 2023 MET GALA, KARL Lagerfeld: A Line of Beauty, inspired several gorgeous and outrageous outfits worn in homage to the late designer's work. But a number of celebrities opted for feline looks that paid tribute to Lagerfeld's 11-year-old Birman cat, Choupette.

Rapper Doja Cat arrived at her first Met Gala in a head-to-toe Oscar De La Renta jeweled cat gown with cat ears, accessorized with a prosthetic cat nose and cat claw–inspired acrylic nails.

Shortly after, someone wearing a fluffy cat suit and head, with blue eyes and gray whiskers that perfectly resembled Choupette's, arrived on the carpet. When the cat head was removed, it was revealed to be actor Jared Leto, who is starring as Lagerfeld in an upcoming biopic he's producing. (It's not the first time the actor has removed his head on the red carpet: In 2019, he arrived carrying a replica of his own noggin.)

The stars' similar red carpet choices prompted several viral social media posts showcasing the duo facing off in such memes as identical Spider-Men pointing at each other—except the heads were replaced by cats).

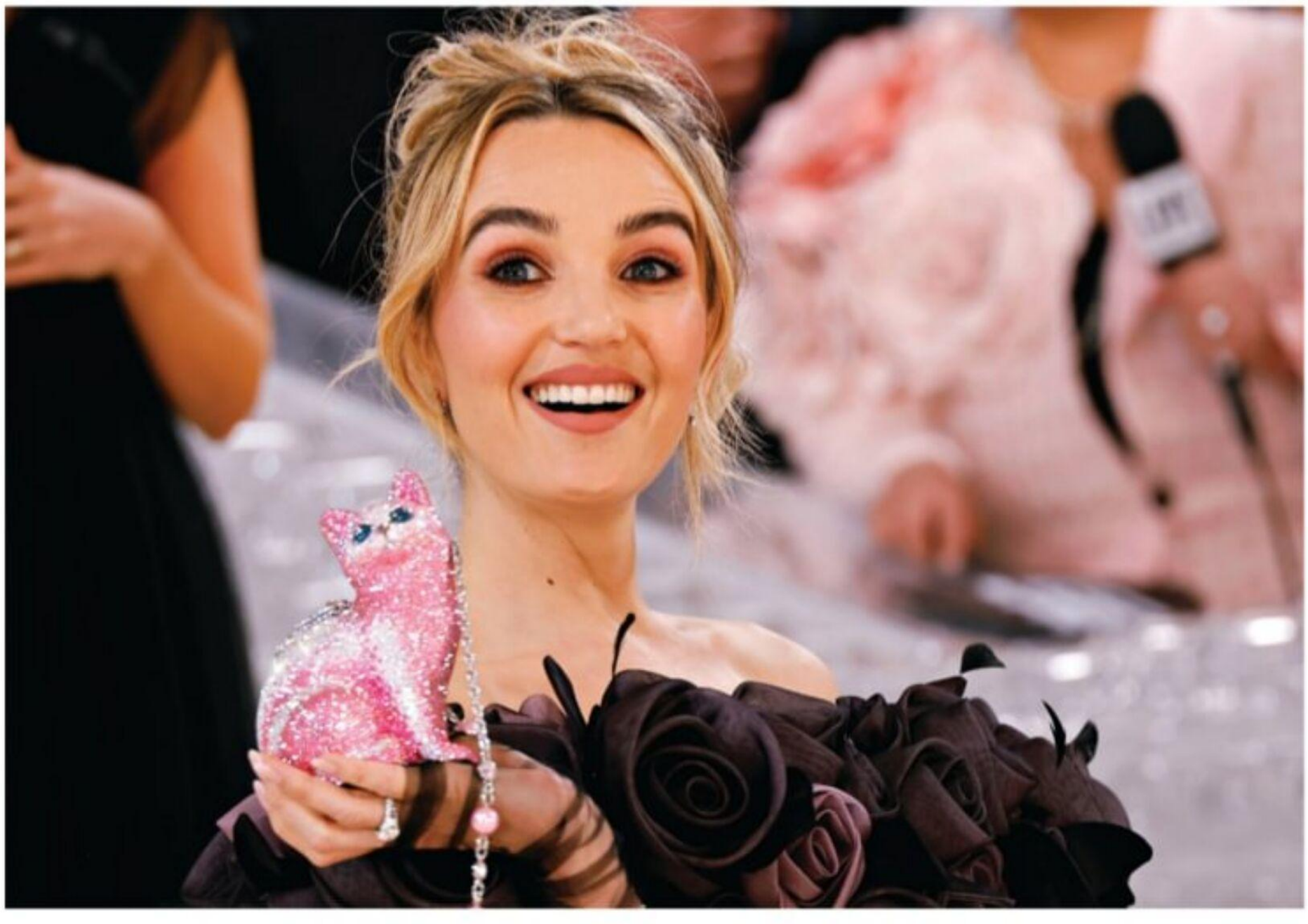
Rapper Lil Nas X responded to reporters only with "Meow" when asked about his look, which featured glistening silver body paint, pearls, and whiskers.

Tributes to Choupette were seen all over the carpet that night, although most were of a more modest scale. Former late-night host James Corden donned a blue suit meant to match the cat's eyes. Singer and actress Janelle Monáe carried a white bag shaped like a cat, and *Saturday Night Live* star Chloe Fineman held a small pink bejeweled cat purse.

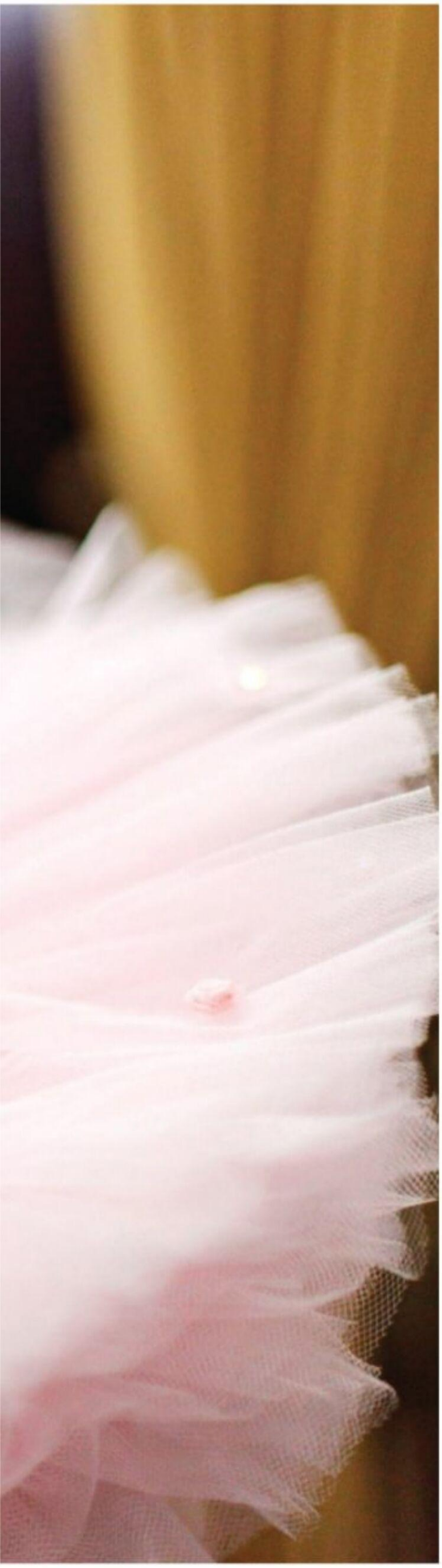
According to her agent, Lucas Bérullier, Choupette was invited to the Met Gala. The cat confirmed she would not attend the event on her Instagram account, which has 264,000 followers, writing, "Many people invited me to walk the red carpet of the Met Gala 2023 in tribute to Daddy, but we preferred to stay peacefully and cozy at home." ◻

Doja Cat wore an Oscar de la Renta jeweled cat gown to her first Met Gala.

Lil Nas X (left) responded only with mews when reporters asked about his cat outfit; Jared Leto (opposite), who will play Karl Lagerfeld in a biopic, paid tribute to the designer's cat, Choupette; Chloe Fineman (below) took a more subtle approach to the theme with her cat purse.



This cat was one of the stars at the 2010 edition of the annual event, whose proceeds benefit animal charities.



Catwalk Creations

Every year the legendary Algonquin Hotel in Manhattan hosts a fashion show where felines strut their stuff.

BY RAISA BRUNER

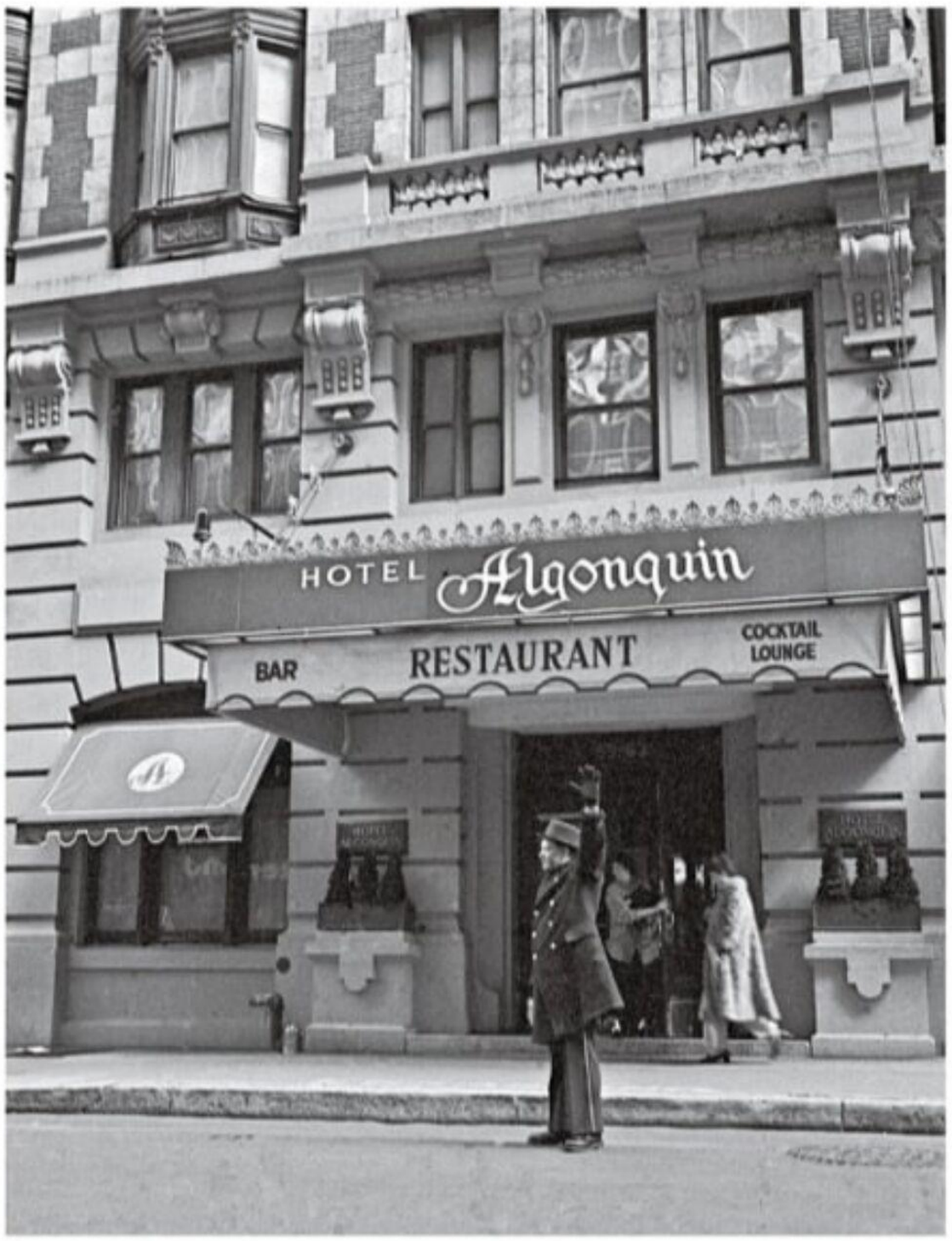
A GAGGLE OF PHOTOGRAPHERS CROWD AROUND EACH model in the makeshift dressing room. The sold-out fashion show at the Algonquin Hotel near New York's Times Square is about to start, but these seasoned models are reclining languidly in the midst of mayhem. "Beautiful, what a good girl," designer Ada Nieves purrs to one as she poses, blinking serenely before the flashes. There's an unusual feature in this hectic prep area: litter boxes on every table. Because these models—or "mewdels," as they're called by the show's creators—are cats. And this fashion show is the 2019 edition Algonquin Hotel's Annual Cat Fashion Show, with proceeds donated to the Mayor's Alliance for NYC's Animals.

The event drew a paying crowd of well over 100 guests to sip champagne, nibble on a tasteful tower of crudités and baguettes, and enjoy the lineup of felines dressed in custom-made couture for the event by Nieves, a certified pet fashion designer. The theme was "It's a Small World," with each of the mewdels—Mrs. Parberry, Canoli, Folds, and seven more—outfitted in handmade looks that represented a different country and cultural history. Nieves told TIME she spent months researching her subjects, matching her chosen models with their looks and crafting their outfits.

The Algonquin is a perfect home for a feline fashion show because it has a long history of hosting cats as guests of honor. The hotel has been

home to at least one kitty at any given time for nearly a century, with various pets named either Hamlet or Matilda. It 2019, it was a Hamlet presiding over the fashion show.

"The cat has always been here. Either you love it or you hate it, and most people love it," explains Chief Cat Officer Alice de Almeida, who started out at the Algonquin as the general manager's assistant. Over the years that job has morphed into her current role—even though she's allergic to cats. Part of the gig is now organizing the annual fashion show. "It's our way, it's Hamlet's way, of giving back to the community and letting everyone know how important adoption is, and to support our local shelters," de Almeida says. Plus, there's a novelty factor that keeps people coming back: "You see dogs in costumes, and you see other animals in costumes, but when do you ever see a cat in a costume?" she asks. "I always equate the dog people to Mickey Mouse people, and cat people to the Bugs Bunny people, because I think cat people are a little quirkier than dog people." □

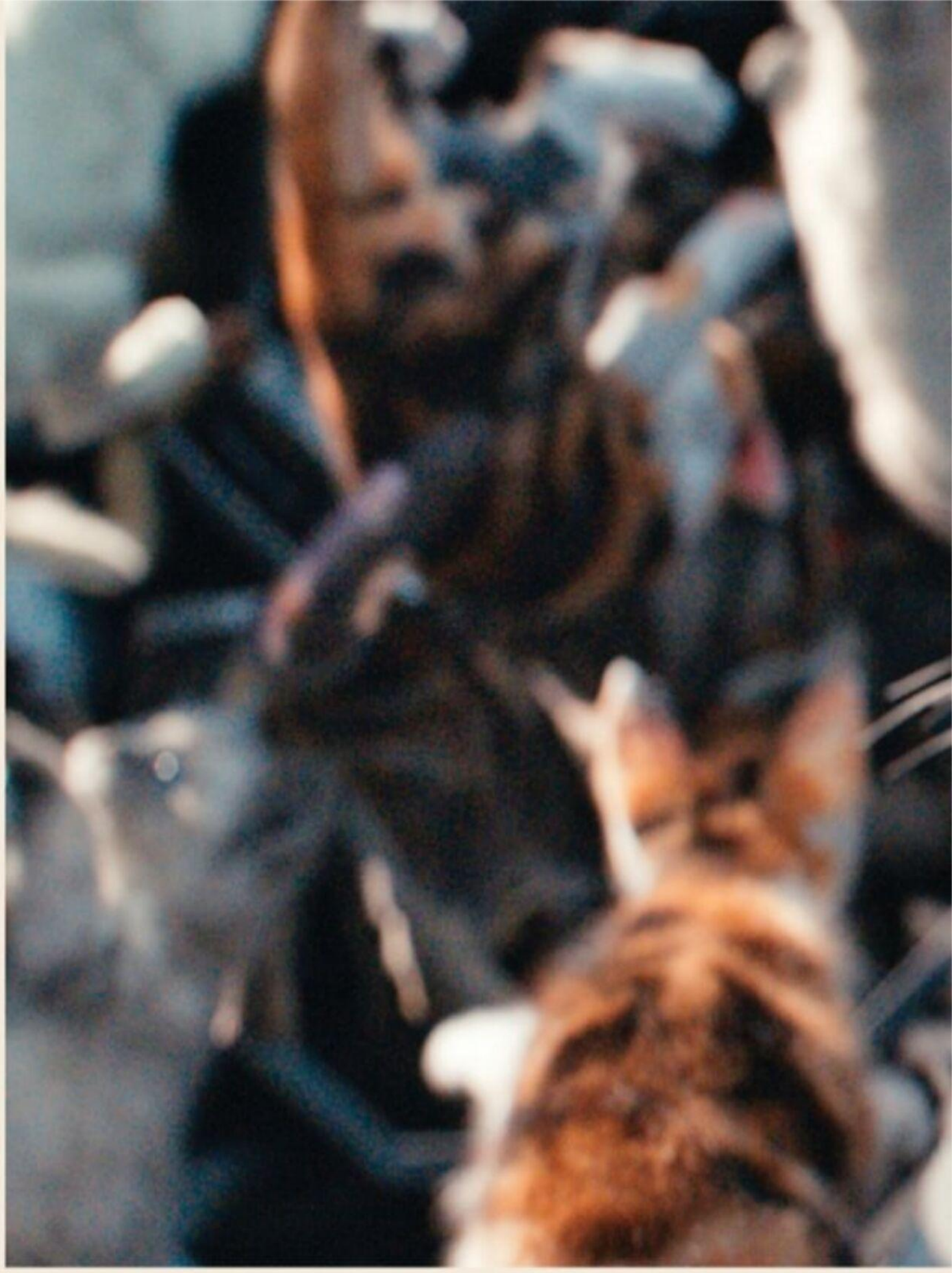


The looks on display at the Algonquin Hotel in Manhattan (opposite, top) included musical inspirations (punk rock and Carmen Miranda) in 2010, and patriotic and Irish costumes in 2019, when the theme was "It's a Small World."

MEET MARVEL'S CATS

Feline actors proved to be difficult to manage when filming a pivotal scene in the latest MCU opus.

BY MOISES MENDEZ II



There's a cat-centric scene in *The Marvels* that I can't get out of my head: At a pivotal moment in the movie, which was released in theaters on November 10, Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) and the SABER crew are trying to find a way off their ship after half of the evacuation pods on the ship stop working. One of the crew members discovers an egg none of them has ever seen before. Suddenly, hundreds of kittens appear and are running around the ship.

The kittens are actually young Flerkens, all born to their mother, Goose, introduced in 2019's *Captain Marvel,* when Carol Danvers (Brie Larson) thought the creature was a regular cat. Though they *look* like cats, Flerkens actually have large tentacles and the ability to lay eggs. They hold pocket realities inside their bodies and can regurgitate things they've ingested.

The kittens appear in *The Marvels* just as Fury and the crew are trying to figure out how to get more than 300 people into 15 escape pods. They resort to using the 100 Flerkittens at their disposal. The kittens run around to ingest the crew members and basically hold them in their tiny little bodies—think Kirby but with tentacles—all while a rendition of "Memory" from the musical *Cats* plays. *The Marvels* director Nia DaCosta selected the song herself, according to Mary Livanos, the film's executive producer.

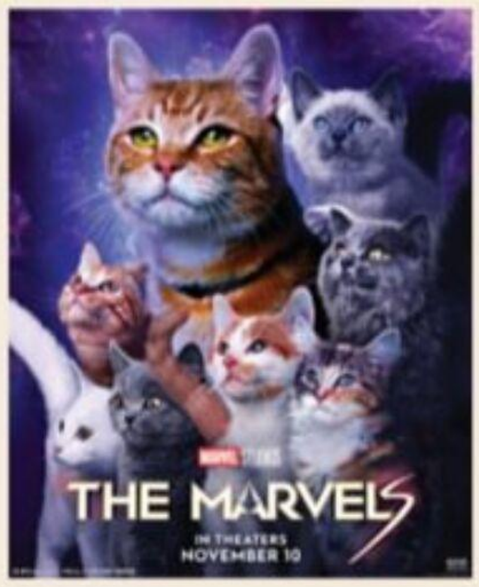
"It always stuck," she tells TIME via email. "What's amazing, too, is the meaning behind the song itself—yearning for a lost sense of belonging, once shared with friends and community. It's 100 percent a theme *The Marvels* shares."

The scene itself featured two real feline actors named Nemo and Tango playing Goose, according to Livanos. The Flerkittens were played by a group of 10 real kittens, with about 100 more Flerkittens created out of visual effects to fill out the scene.

"It's nearly impossible to train cats, let alone kittens, so the kittens could only really run from point A to point B. Of course, many would miss the target, sending crew scurrying after them, including Nia DaCosta," Livanos says. "But in the end, it really worked to our advantage because the scene was supposed to feel chaotic, and the kittens were indeed pure chaos."

The film makes clear how much havoc the little fur babies wreaked on set. "VFX helped ensure each kitten was a character unto itself and infused an incredible amount of comedy into the sequence," Livanos tells TIME, "the pièce de résistance being the escape pod of Flerkittens finally taking flight."

She adds that it was "a total bonus that we get to introduce these characters through Nick Fury's subplot, who is especially bonded with Goose. It was a bucket list item we had in mind from the beginning of development, and it was a blast to incorporate them in such a solid, fun, and clutch way."



The 2019 film Captain Marvel *featured a cat named Goose (left, with Jackson), who turned out to be an alien Flerken with tentacles in her mouth. In the 2023 film* The Marvels *(top, above), a herd of Goose's offspring took over during a memorable scene.*

The cat paintings of Wain have a sad backstory; the Cheshire Cat from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (opposite) is iconic.

Muses Who've Mewed

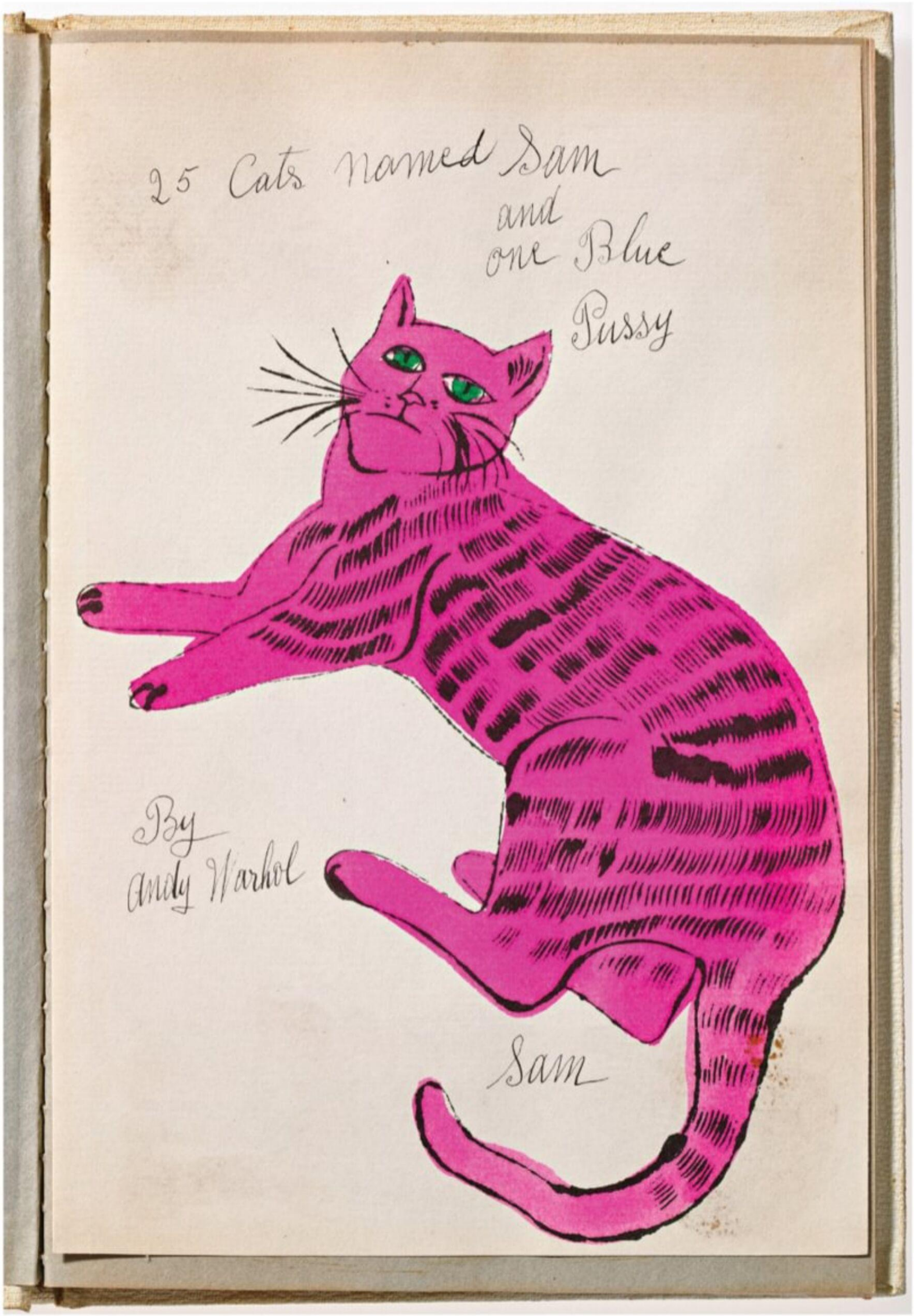
Artists such as Andy Warhol, Leonardo da Vinci, and the storied Louis Wain have found inspiration in the feline form.

BY BILL SYKEN

LONG BEFORE ANDY WARHOL EVER created artwork around Campbell's Soup cans or Marilyn Monroe, this storied leader of the pop art movement turned his eyes to cats. It was a natural subject for him at that point in his life—he was then a struggling artist living in a small apartment on East 75th Street that he shared with his mother and a teeming collection of cats. Maybe one sign of the artist Warhol would become that can be gleaned from his relationship with cats would be his fondness for repetition, as nearly all of his cats were named Sam. In 1954, Warhol and his mother created a limited-edition book titled *25 Cats Name Sam and One Blue Pussy*. The *d* was left off the word *name* in the book's title by his mother by accident at first, but Warhol decided he liked the mistake and kept it in.

Warhol's drawings of his cats are affectionate and warm, to the point that it alters your perception of an artist who can be perceived as cool and distant. In an adorable coda to the story, Warhol's nephew James wrote a children's book called *Andy Warhol's Cats*, built around the premise that the artist wanted to make his cats famous, if not for 15 minutes then at least long enough to make them more desirable targets for adoption.

Warhol is one of many notable artists to commemorate their feline friends in works of art. The full list would be enough to fill a museum, if not several: Leonardo da Vinci, Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder, Jeff Koons, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Mary Cassatt, David Hockney—it might be easier to just list the artists who have never painted cats at all. Henri Matisse, creator of some of the most noted images, had three pet cats and was known to give them pieces of brioche in the morning; they were impor-


25 Cats named Sam
and
one Blue
Pussy
By
Andy Warhol
Sam

tant companions to him, especially in his later years, when the artist, who suffered from bouts of cancer, was largely confined to his home.

Sometimes cats are the centerpieces of historic paintings, and other times they lurk significantly in the background. The winner of the award for Best Cat in a Supporting Role would likely go to the black cat in Édouard Manet's "Olympia," one of the seminal works of modern art. The main subject of the painting is a reclining nude courtesan being tended to by a maid; Manet caused quite the commotion in 19th-century Paris by showing a prostitute in a pose normally reserved for a goddess of myth. And curled up by the courtesan's feet was a black cat with an arched back who glared at the viewer with angry eyes. More than a fair bit of ink has been spilled by critics and historians arguing about the meaning of that particular cat: Is it a symbol of dark sexuality? Perhaps it belongs to a male visitor? Or maybe it is a symbolic stand-in for the artist himself. There's no agreement, except about this: In this provocative artwork, the cat heightens the mood.

Perhaps the most extraordinary paintings ever done of cats, and certainly the ones most freighted with emotion, were done by British artist Louis Wain

Opposite: A cat drawing from Warhol's 25 Cats Name Sam and One Blue Pussy*; top: Morris Hirshfield's "Angora Cat"; above: da Vinci's "Cats, Lions, and a Dragon."*

in the early part of the 20th century. Cats were the main subject of his work, and for good reason.

The story of Wain is both tragic and romantic. As a young man he married a woman named Emily Richardson, who had been working as a governess for his sisters. Wain at that time worked as a freelance illustrator. The couple had a cat named Peter.

Soon after they married, Emily was diagnosed with what would become a terminal case of breast cancer. Throughout her illness, Wain would attempt to buoy her spirits by giving her drawings of Peter. One of the editors Wain worked with saw those drawings and offered to publish them. Wain's first collection of 150 cat drawings came out just days before Emily succumbed to her cancer. Wain continued to paint cats for the rest of his life even as, due to the mental illness he suffered from, he was institutionalized. The mental illness helps explain why his later

Gillian MacKenzie's embroidered "Cat and Snail" (1961-62) is in the collection of the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum.

A TRUE COLLECTOR'S ITEM

It's the world's largest cat painting, yet it captured a mere 42 of its owner's 350 felines.

Many people celebrate their cats in paintings, and in one case the painting turned into a valuable work of art. In 2015, a canvas that is believed to be the world's largest cat painting was auctioned off at Sotheby's in New York for $826,000. The composition is titled "My Wife's Lovers" and was painted by Austrian artist Carl Kahler around 1893. It weighs 227 pounds, measures 75 by 102 inches, and is so large it had to be hung on a specially constructed wall, according to the CBC.

The cats featured in the work of art belonged to the painting's commissioner, Kate Birdsall Johnson. However, only 42 of her 350 felines made the cut for the piece. A cat named Sultan, a $3000 purchase for Johnson, sits in the painting's center spot.

Cat enthusiasts were entranced by the painting while it was on display at the auction house. "When 'My Wife's Lovers' first went on exhibit, two women showed up with folding chairs and just sat and stared at the painting, taking in each different cat and their painted personality," the CBC reported.
—Megan McCluskey

"The Cat," by Ukrainian-American artist Jacques Hnizdovsky, 1962.

artworks take on increasingly psychedelic qualities.

If Wain's story sounds like the stuff of movies, it is: In 2021, Benedict Cumberbatch starred in *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain*. After the film was released, the Bethlem Museum of the Mind, which is located on the site of a working psychiatric hospital, staged an exhibition of Wain's artwork and included mirrors on which Wain had painted his beloved cats while he was institutionalized.

If you were to draw a connection between the cat drawings of Wain and those of Warhol and also Matisse, it would simply be this: For these artists, the cats were a friendly face through hard times. Which is more than reason enough for anyone, artist or not, to want to create some kind of commemoration of their faithful companions. ◻

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Cats

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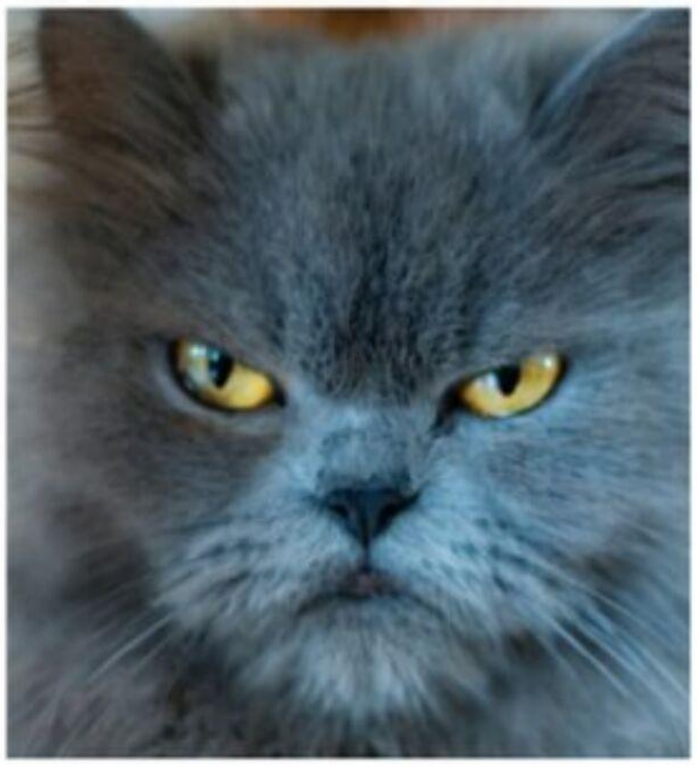
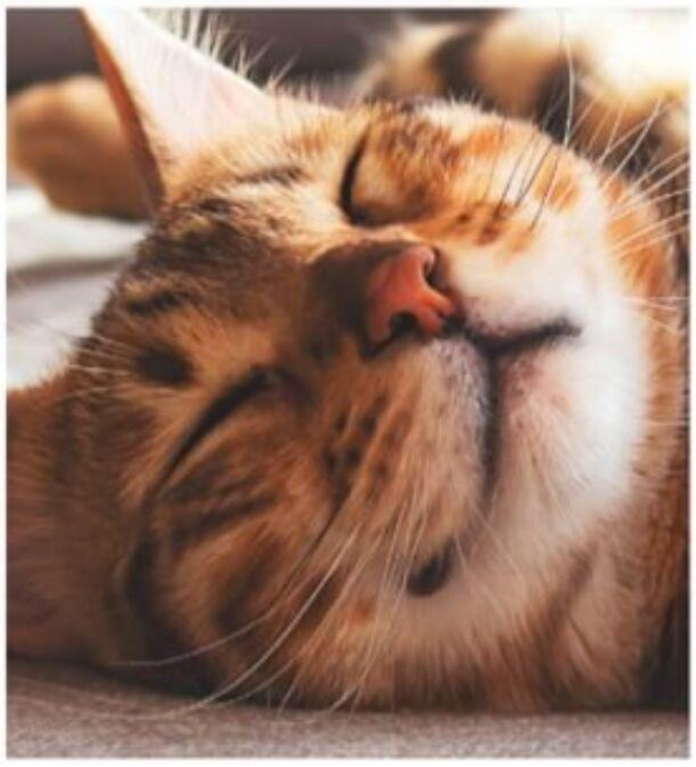
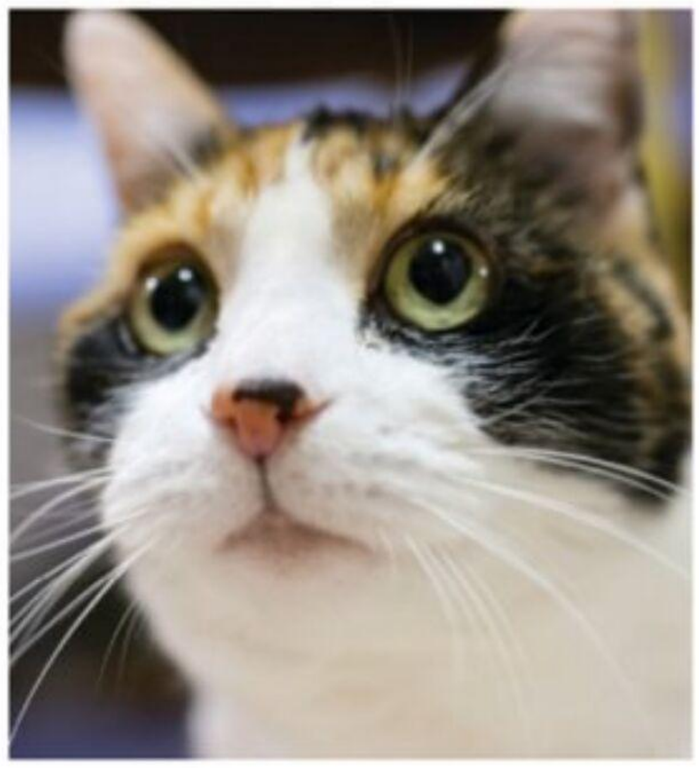
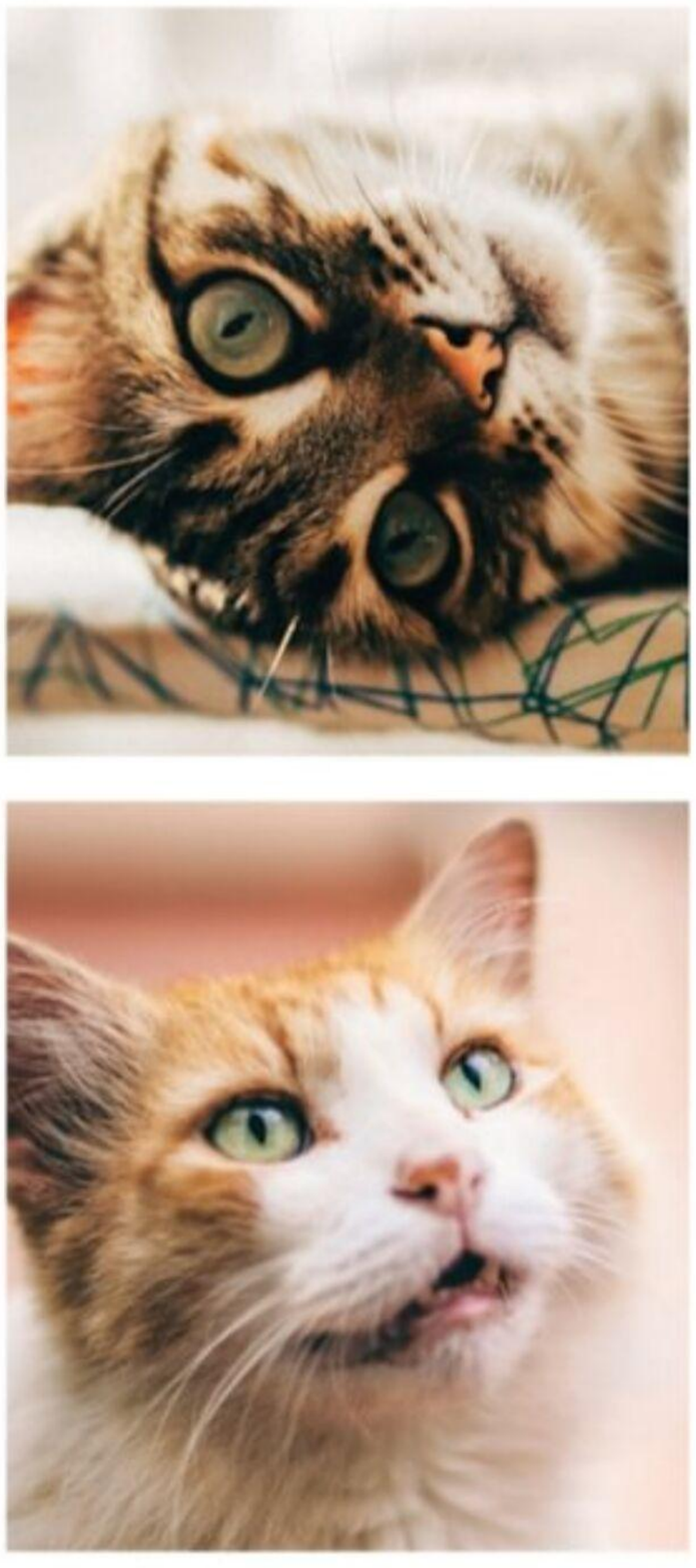
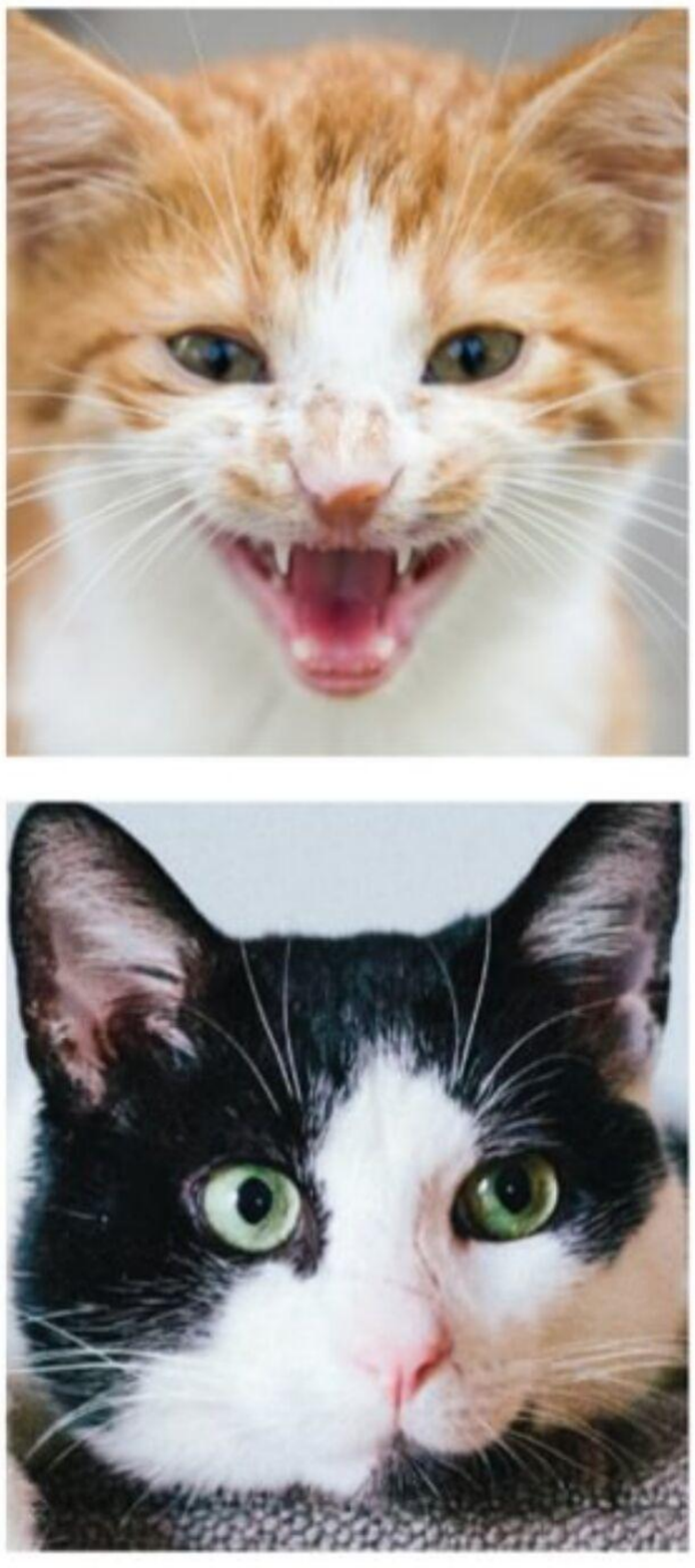
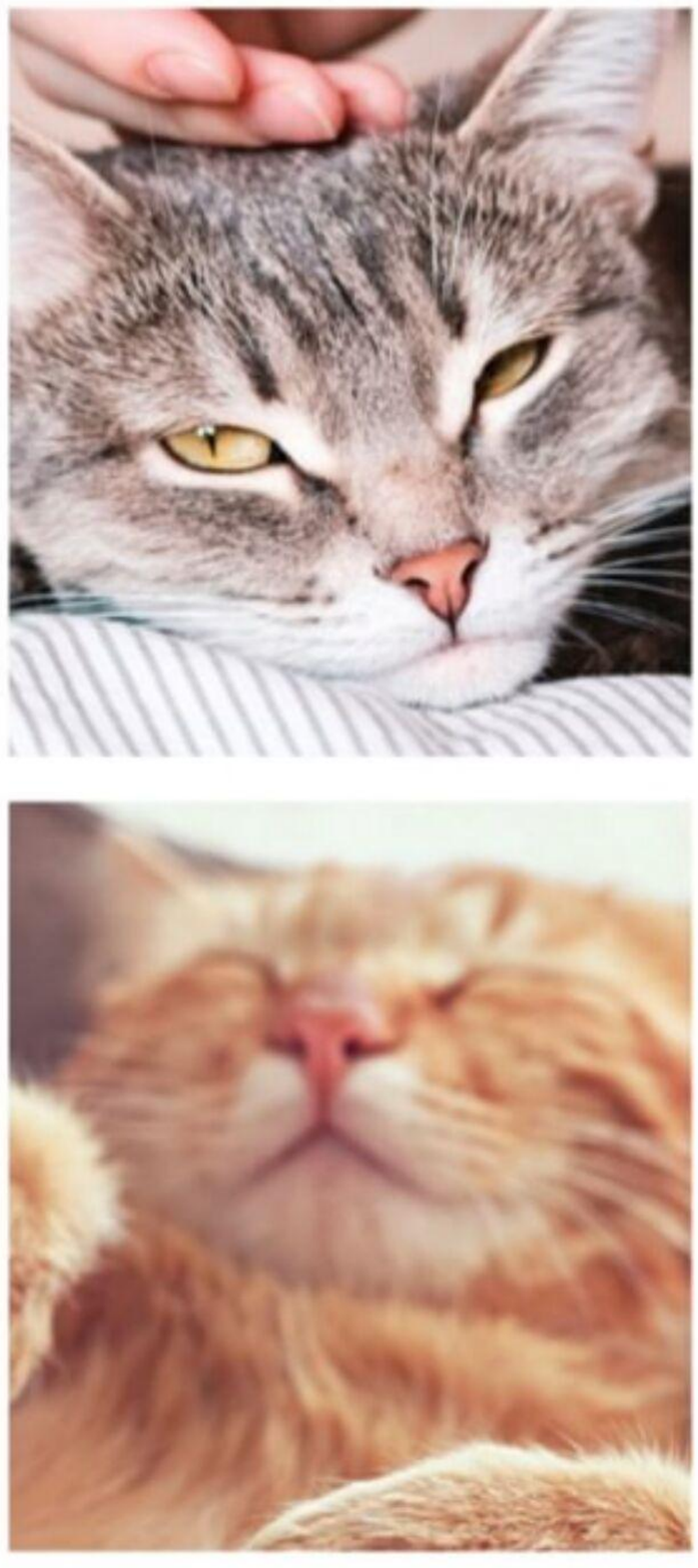

LOOKS OF LOVE (AND OTHER STUFF)

Each one of these pictures tells a story, although researchers are still trying to figure out exactly what they mean. According to a study published in the journal *Behavioural Processes* in October 2023, cats have 276 distinct facial expressions, and that level of complexity suggests that cats have much they are trying to communicate. The study was conducted by analyzing video of interactions at a cat café in Los Angeles. What do all those expressions mean? We're still in need of a feline Rosetta Stone to answer that question, although the researchers did classify 45.7 percent of the expressions as friendly, while 37 percent were aggressive. So on the whole, more nice that not!